

The Economic and Social Research Institute



# **CHOICES** *and* **CHALLENGES**

*Moving from Junior Cycle  
to Senior Cycle Education*

**Emer Smyth *and*  
Emma Calvert**





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## **Moving from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle Education**

*Emer Smyth*

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The Liffey Press  
*in association with*  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines the experiences of young people as they make the transition from junior cycle (lower secondary) to senior cycle (upper secondary) education. It is part of a series of reports which explore student experiences as they move through the second-level schooling system. In a companion volume (Smyth, Banks and Calvert, 2011), we explore young people's experiences of preparing for the Leaving Certificate exams and for life after school, and highlight the skills and competencies students feel they have gained from their education. Taken together, the two reports provide crucial insights for policy development concerning senior cycle education.

In systems where lower and upper secondary education are provided in different schools, transition experiences mirror the move from primary to secondary schooling, with students having new teachers, taking new subjects and adjusting to a new peer group (Wigfield et al., 1991; Darmody, 2008b). However, much less is known about what the transition is like for young people who remain within the same school setting, as they do in Ireland. Drawing on survey and interview data from Transition Year and fifth year students in twelve case-study schools, this study sets out to address this gap in knowledge by exploring the choices students make over the transition as well as their learning experiences and relations with their teachers and peers. This executive summary outlines the main findings of the study and the implications for policy development.

## **Main Findings**

### *Choosing Programmes, Subjects and Subject Levels*

In the process of making the transition to senior cycle, students are required to choose among the available senior cycle programmes and subjects, although the particular choices open to young people depend on the school they attend. The Transition Year (TY) programme, designed to provide students with access to a broader array of activities and learning experiences, is unique to Ireland. The programme is provided in seven of the case-study schools and is taken by around forty per cent of the total cohort. Consistent with the findings of previous research (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004), TY tends to attract students who are already highly engaged in school as well as younger students. Choice of TY was generally motivated by the desire to have a break from formal study and to access broader learning experiences and activities.

Clear differences are also evident in the profile of students taking different Leaving Certificate programmes. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, introduced to address the needs of students who might have difficulties with schoolwork in other programmes, is generally taken by those who have received learning support during junior cycle, many of them in the context of lower stream (lower ability) classes, who have lower educational aspirations and who often have a record of misbehaviour. The Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational (LCVP) programmes are taken by a broad range of students in terms of social background, prior achievement and junior cycle experiences. Selecting LCVP was generally motivated by the ability to accrue extra 'points' for higher education entry as well as the opportunity to access work experience.

The choice of subjects open to students and the way in which the choice process occurs varies across the case-study schools. Students are usually required to select their subjects before the Junior Certificate exam but in the case of those taking TY, they generally have the opportunity to sample different subjects, thus being facilitated in making a more informed choice. The choice of subjects is found to be influenced by having taken a related subject, and by experiences of that subject, at junior cycle.

Parents are found to be the main source of advice in choosing programmes and subjects, as was the case at junior cycle (Smyth et al., 2004). The role of formal guidance provision in this process is found to vary across schools, with subject teachers playing a more influential role than the guidance counsellor. While generally satisfied with the information they received on programme options, many students would have liked more information on the content of specific subjects and the implications of taking certain subjects for longer term pathways.

The selection of subject levels reflects the culmination of a longer term process, with level take-up for the Junior Certificate setting the parameters for available options in fifth year. Thus, students are extremely unlikely to move ‘up’ a level, from ordinary to higher level, and are much more likely to drop ‘down’ a level, especially in Maths. Subject teachers are found to play a more important role in influencing the subject level taken than was the case for selecting programmes and subjects.

### *Learning Experiences and the Transition to Senior Cycle*

Student learning experiences are found to vary according to the senior cycle programme they enter. The TY programme is characterised by a diversity of subjects and activities, with a much greater emphasis on project work, group work, expressing opinions and use of ICT than in the Leaving Certificate programmes. There is a noticeable contrast too between the learning experiences of LCA and LCE/LCVP students. LCA students report more frequent use of active learning methods, including project and group work, an approach which helps to re-engage some students who were previously disaffected with school. In contrast, LCE and LCVP classes are characterised by more teacher-centred approaches and more frequent use of homework. The programmes differ too in access to work experience, with placements making up a core component for TY and LCA students.

Both school staff and students report an escalation in schoolwork demands as students move into the first year of the LCE and LCVP programmes, but not the LCA programme, whose students report a more manageable workload. Students report a gap in the standards expected of them between junior and senior cycle, with much more detailed course content, complex terminology and the requirement to write essay-style

answers for assignments. Over the transition, there is an increase in the perceived difficulty of subjects, such as English and Home Economics, which were not seen as difficult at junior cycle level. In response to these increased demands, LCE and LCVP students become less confident about their capacity to cope with schoolwork, with slightly more negative attitudes emerging towards school. Many students also report that they had not been aware of the course content and demands involved in particular subjects.

At the same time, students reported being given more responsibility for their learning than had been the case at junior cycle. Many students feel that their teachers are treating them more as adults, although this varies across different groups of students, and there is a decline in the extent of negative teacher-student interaction (being reprimanded) between third and fifth year. Relations among students seem to have improved since junior cycle, with a decline in bullying levels over the transition.

### **Implications for Policy Development**

This study yields significant insights into issues for policy development, especially in the context of on-going discussions concerning senior cycle reform. Three key sets of issues emerge from the findings and will be addressed in the remainder of this section.

#### *1. The impact of junior cycle processes on later outcomes*

- The study findings clearly point to the crucial role played by student experiences at junior cycle in shaping their later pathways and outcomes, and these prior processes largely account for later differences in outcomes by social class and gender.
- In choosing subjects before entry to post-primary education, students are often unaware of the longer term implications and may unwittingly restrict their access to later pathways. Schools should therefore be encouraged to provide a subject sampling system for part or all of first year, and provided with the necessary resources to ensure this.
- Students should be encouraged to pursue junior cycle subjects at

higher level in so far as possible and flexible approaches to ability grouping used to support this process. Otherwise, some students, particularly those in working-class schools and/or lower stream classes, will be hindered from pursuing certain post-school education and career pathways.

- The importance of early choices highlights the need to provide guidance on the choice of subjects and subject levels at an earlier stage. A whole-school approach to guidance is likely to provide better support for student choice, since young people also depend on their subject teachers for advice on the content of subjects.

## 2. *The structure of senior cycle education*

- It is evident that the kinds of learning experiences which students access depend on the programme they take, which, in turn, depends on the school they attend.
- Students taking the TY programme experience more active teaching and learning methods and have access to a broader range of subjects and activities. There is a tension, however, in trying to offer the benefits of TY to the whole cohort of students, since students in schools where the programme is compulsory appear to be less satisfied with the programme, and staff in working-class schools report a potential conflict between providing TY and retaining students to the end of senior cycle.
- Students taking the LCA programme experience more active learning methods while those taking LCE or LCVP report more teacher-dominated classroom settings, differences in approaches which have clear consequences for student engagement.
- These findings point to a need for the adoption of more active teaching and learning approaches across the whole range of senior cycle programmes. The TY programme also shows the potential for the design and development of courses and materials at the school level.

## 3. *The adjustment to senior cycle*

- Policy discussion has often centred on the transition from primary to

post-primary education but the transition to senior cycle also involves a significant period of adjustment for students.

- LCE and LCVP students (and key personnel in their schools) report a ‘gap’ in standards between junior and senior cycle, with an escalation in workload on entry to fifth year as well as more complex course materials and modes of assessment.
- This pattern points to the need to examine the extent of continuity between related subjects at junior and senior cycle. The provision of more precise information on the detailed content of subjects would also help students to make more informed decisions about the subjects they select.
- Many students report difficulties with higher level subjects, with some dropping down from higher to ordinary level because of course demands. There would appear to be a need for greater transparency in what is involved in the different subject levels to assist student choices.

This study has examined the transition from junior to senior cycle and student experiences of the first year of their Leaving Certificate programme. The way in which this transition shapes Leaving Certificate performance and plans for the future is discussed in a companion volume (Smyth, Banks and Calvert, 2011).

## *Chapter One*

# **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background to the Study**

This study explores the experiences of young people as they move from junior to senior cycle within post-primary education. It is part of a series of reports which seeks to further our understanding of student experiences as they progress through the schooling system. In a companion volume (Smyth, Banks and Calvert, 2011), we explore student experiences of preparing for the Leaving Certificate exams and for life after school, and highlight the skills and competencies students feel they have gained from their second-level education. Taken together, the two reports provide crucial insights for policy development concerning senior cycle education.

The transition from primary to post-primary education has been the subject of a good deal of research in Ireland and internationally (see, for example, Galton et al., 1999; O'Brien, 2004). However, the transition to senior cycle (or upper secondary) education has received comparatively little attention (see Darmody, 2008a). Insights into this process are particularly important since the pathways open to students begin to diverge at this stage. For some students, there is the option of entering the Transition Year (TY) programme prior to entry to one of the Leaving Certificate programmes; other students move directly into fifth year. A further complexity is that the senior cycle curriculum is comprised of three different Leaving Certificate programmes, with a variety of subjects and subject levels. Access to these programmes is shaped by the school attended as well as the student's own decisions and choices. The pathways that students take at this stage are likely to have longer term implications for their access to post-school education, training and employment.

This phase builds upon earlier analyses of student experiences during junior cycle. *Moving Up* (Smyth et al., 2004) documented the factors influencing student transitions to post-primary education. For many students, this process was one of turbulence and change but the majority of students settled into the new school setting relatively quickly. Many students experienced a marked discontinuity between primary and post-primary school, reporting a mismatch between the academic standards expected of them in the final year of primary school and the first year of second-level education. This mismatch was found to have longer term effects as students who found subjects easier in first year than in primary school tended to underperform when they reached Junior Certificate level. *Pathways through the Junior Cycle* (Smyth et al., 2006) found increased differentiation emerging among students in second year; girls, middle-class students and those with higher ability levels were more likely to become increasingly engaged academically, while boys, working-class students and those with lower ability levels were more likely to drift. This drift or disengagement had significant effects on subsequent Junior Certificate performance, indicating the importance of second year as a basis for student engagement.

*Gearing up for the Exam?* (Smyth et al., 2007) explored student experiences in the lead-up to their first national examination, the Junior Certificate. Owing to the presence of the examination, third year assumed quite a distinctive character, with students finding schoolwork harder and spending more time on homework and study than previously. Students also reported that classroom teaching had become more focused on preparation for the exam with less use of a diverse range of methodologies on the part of teachers. Performance in the Junior Certificate exam was found to be influenced by a range of student and school factors. Students allocated to lower stream (lower ability) classes achieved lower grades than other students, even controlling for prior ability. The pattern of behaviour and interaction with teachers established from second year had longer term consequences, with lower grades achieved by those who had experienced negative interaction with teachers and shown higher levels of misbehaviour. In addition, students' perceived capacity to cope with schoolwork was predictive of exam performance, with this pattern established as early as second year. This capacity was, in turn,



influenced by the extent to which students had received positive reinforcement or negative feedback from their teachers. In sum, both structural arrangements and school climate were found to influence student academic performance at junior cycle level.

In this study, we build upon our research at junior cycle to explore the way in which young people make the transition to senior cycle and the extent to which their earlier experiences influence these later processes. Evidence of this kind is all the more important given on-going debate in the Irish context about the future structure of second-level education (NCCA, 2011a, 2011b). Before placing this study in the context of previous research, we outline briefly the specific features of senior cycle education in Ireland.

## **1.2 Senior Cycle Education**

Junior cycle (lower secondary) education in Ireland is comprised of a three-year programme, at the end of which students take the Junior Certificate exam. After this exam, students may take the Transition Year programme or proceed directly to the first year of a Leaving Certificate programme. Thus, the senior cycle stage comprises two or three years, depending on whether students take Transition Year.

Transition Year (TY) was introduced to provide students with access to a broader range of subjects, skills and experiences than otherwise provided in second-level education and is unique to the Irish context. TY was first introduced as a pilot programme in the mid-1970s but expanded significantly after its restructuring in 1994 (for further details on the programme, see Chapter Two). The decision to offer TY rests with the school, with three-quarters of second-level schools providing the programme, usually on an optional basis. Smaller schools and those serving more disadvantaged populations are less likely to provide TY than other schools (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). Participation in TY has increased over the past decade, from 22,754 students in 2000 to 28,635 students in 2010 (DES, 2011).

There are three types of Leaving Certificate programme: the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

(LCVP). All of the programmes are two years in duration. The LCE is taken by the largest group of young people (61 per cent of the cohort in 2010). Students following the programme are required to study at least five subjects but generally take seven. Assessment is generally on the basis of written examination, although in some cases, written examinations are supplemented by oral and aural tests (in languages) or by student practical or project work (in Art, Music and technological subjects).

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) was introduced in 1994 to foster in students a spirit of enterprise and initiative and to develop their interpersonal, vocational and technological skills. Students must take at least five Leaving Certificate subjects, two of which must be from a specified list of vocational subject groupings, a recognised modern language course plus two link modules, which focus on preparation for the world of work and enterprise education. The link modules are assessed on the basis of a portfolio of coursework and a written examination. For all other subjects, students are assessed in the same way as LCE students. The programme is provided in 72 per cent of second-level schools and is taken by 35 per cent of students (DES, 2011).

The LCA was introduced in 1995 for young people who were not catered for by the other programmes and who might otherwise be at risk of early school leaving. It differs from the other two programmes in offering a combination of general education, vocational education and vocational preparation courses. The approach to assessment is also quite distinct, being based on completion of modules, the performance of tasks and achievement in the terminal examination. Unlike LCE and LCVP, the LCA qualification is not recognised for direct access to higher education. In 2010, LCA was provided by 40 per cent of all second-level schools (DES, 2011); the proportion of schools providing the programme is greatest in the community/comprehensive sector (73 per cent) compared with the vocational sector (43 per cent) and voluntary secondary schools (30 per cent). Take-up of the LCA programme has been fairly stable (at 6–8 per cent of the student cohort) over the last decade.

For all students, moving from junior to senior cycle involves a reduction in the number of different subjects taken and, at least for LCE and

LCVP students,<sup>1</sup> greater choice over the subjects studied. In some subject areas, there is scope for greater subject specialisation, for example, the contrast between Science at junior cycle and the separate subjects of Biology, Chemistry and Physics at senior cycle. Subjects may be studied at ordinary or higher level, with an additional foundation level available for Irish and Mathematics targeted at students who are likely to have difficulty taking ordinary level. For some subjects, ‘setting’ may be used whereby students are allocated to a class according to the level they are taking in that particular subject. Thus, a student may be in a higher level English class but an ordinary level Maths class. For other subjects, students may be taught in ‘mixed ability’ classes, where some students are taking higher level and others ordinary level. The use of setting has been found to vary across schools and across subjects (see Smyth, 1999).

Ireland differs from many other educational systems in having a relatively undifferentiated upper secondary level. While the introduction of the LCA has led to a certain degree of differentiation, in principle, the vast majority of Leaving Certificate students are eligible for higher education entry. This contrasts with the situation in many other European countries (such as Germany and the Netherlands) where the academic tracks leading to higher education are open to only a minority of the student cohort (LeMétais, 2002; OECD, 2004). The Irish system also provides lower and upper secondary levels in the same school setting, unlike France, for example, where the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education requires moving to a new school (see LeMétais, 2002).

In the following section, we outline previous research on the transition to upper secondary education in order to better contextualise our study.

### **1.3 Previous Research on the Transition to Senior Cycle**

From a cross-national perspective, the transition to upper secondary education usually coincides with the transfer from compulsory to post-compulsory education. However, in many countries, the focus of upper

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<sup>1</sup> LCA students tend to report less choice of subjects than those taking the other programmes (see Banks et al., 2010, and Chapter Four of this study).

secondary education has shifted from the preparation of an élite group for university education to encompassing young people with a diverse range of abilities and aspirations (OECD, 2004). National educational systems differ in whether lower and upper secondary levels are provided within the same institutional setting and in the extent of differentiation between tracks or programmes.

A large body of research internationally has focused on socio-economic differences in the likelihood of staying on in post-compulsory education and in the track pursued. Across very different educational systems, young people from middle-class and highly educated backgrounds are significantly more likely to stay on in school to the completion of upper secondary education (see Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). Young people from middle-class backgrounds are also more likely to pursue the kinds of academic track which will facilitate entry to higher education. Thus, in Germany, young people whose parents had higher educational levels are found to be more likely to transfer to an academic track at upper secondary level; some of this difference is due to higher achievement levels at lower secondary level among those from highly educated families but social background continues to have a direct effect on the pathway taken (Schneider and Tieben, 2011).

Research indicates that individual school characteristics also have a significant influence on whether students will continue on in post-compulsory education, even controlling for student characteristics (Cheng, 1995; Paterson and Raffe, 1995). Similarly, schools are found to influence the kinds of choices of tracks and subjects made by students. Both social class mix and school ethos are influential, with students more likely to go on to take academic rather than vocational routes in more middle-class schools with a strong emphasis on academic standards (Foskett et al., 2006). Schools also make a difference to how young people make decisions and how satisfied they are with their choices. Young people are found to value sufficient time to make decisions, the opportunity to talk individually to teachers, and the provision of detailed and impartial information on available choices. In the absence of such supports, young people are more likely to turn to their family and friends for advice (Blenkinsop et al., 2006).

Some research in the United States has explored the transition from middle to high school, which involves changing to a different school setting. This research has pointed to similar processes to those involved in the transition from elementary to middle school, with a decline in self-esteem and in self-concept in specific subjects over the transition (Wigfield et al., 1991). American research also points to the importance of home environment in supporting the transition to high school (Grolnick et al., 2000). However, very little research has examined student experiences of school engagement, learning and interaction with teachers over the transition to upper secondary education, especially in systems where this does not require a change of school. An exception is work by Darmody (2008b) who suggests that the move to post-compulsory education in Estonia (where at least some of the students remain in the same school) results in many of the same transition issues as the movement to post-primary education for young people in Ireland. These issues centre on academic challenges and on the need to integrate with new peer groups. In the Finnish context, Salmela-Aro and Tuominen-Soini (2010) report an increase in life satisfaction among adolescents over the course of the transition to upper secondary (or vocational) education, an increase which they attribute to the better 'fit' between the individual and the educational setting in post-compulsory education. In contrast, a longitudinal study in Flanders indicates a decline in pupil well-being and academic self-concept (that is, self-rating of academic abilities) between second and sixth grade of secondary education, a pattern that held for both boys and girls (De Fraine et al., 2005). In contrast to the focus on changes in young people's self-concept and overall well-being, there has been relatively little attention internationally to their experiences of teaching and learning over the transition to upper secondary education.

The lack of a specific research focus on the transition to senior cycle has also been evident in the Irish context. A number of studies do, however, yield insights into the processes involved. The Transition Year programme is a unique feature of the Irish educational system, given its focus on flexibility of programme provision in the context of an otherwise standardised school system and the way in which it can act as a 'bridge' between junior and senior cycle. Research indicates that students, teachers and parents tend to be broadly positive about Transition

Year, emphasising the chance to try out different subjects, help with career planning, a different approach to learning, a break from examination pressure, and the opportunity to mature (Jeffers, 2007; Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). However, in many cases teachers and students stress that Transition Year is 'not for everyone', indicating that greater benefits accrue to those who actively participate in the programme. On average, students who have taken Transition Year are found to achieve significantly higher Leaving Certificate grades than those who have not taken the programme, even taking into account prior differences between the two groups (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004).

Processes at junior cycle are found to influence student pathways at senior cycle. The subjects studied for the Junior Certificate help to channel students into related subjects at senior cycle, with few students taking up subjects for the first time at this stage (Millar and Kelly, 1999). Furthermore, the attitudes of students to subjects formed during junior cycle are predictive of their later subject choices (Hannan et al., 1983; Smyth and Hannan, 2002). Similarly, the subject levels taken by students at junior cycle tend to channel them into particular levels at senior cycle, with very little movement found 'upwards' between ordinary and higher level or between foundation and ordinary level (Millar and Kelly, 1999; Smyth and Hannan, 2002).

Differences are evident between schools in the performance of students at Leaving Certificate level, even controlling for prior differences between students (Smyth, 1999). Students tend to do better academically where they are actively involved in school life (formally and informally), where there is a flexible approach to subject choice, where they have good relations with their teachers, and where their teachers hold high expectations for them.

Existing research on senior cycle education in Ireland has been cross-sectional in nature or has had limited information available on the pathways young people take over time. The main advantage of the current study is the possibility of directly comparing experiences at junior and senior cycle for the same student group. This will yield significant insights into the way students change and develop as they move to senior cycle. The methodology used in the study is discussed in the following section.

## 1.4 Methodology

This book reports on part of a mixed methods, longitudinal study into student experiences in post-primary schools in Ireland, the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS). The PPLS combines the use of quantitative survey information collected from a broader cohort of students with in-depth group interviews with smaller groups of students. Mixed methods studies are increasingly popular in the social sciences, especially in the field of education, where the combination of research methods can ‘answer research questions that could not be answered in any other way’ (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003, p. x). In the case of the PPLS, survey data allow us to explore *what happens* but the qualitative data allow us to unpack *why it happens*. The longitudinal nature of the study yields crucial insights into the *dynamics* of school processes, allowing us to examine the interaction between young people and their school environment over time.

The Post-Primary Longitudinal Study 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 conducted at the beginning of the study.<sup>2</sup> 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. The profile of the case-study schools is presented in Table 1.1.

The presence of the TY programme means that students in the cohort enter their Leaving Certificate programme at different time-points. Among the twelve case-study schools, three provide TY on a compulsory (or quasi-compulsory<sup>3</sup>) basis, four offer TY on an optional basis while five schools do not provide the programme. This variation meant that the fieldwork for this phase of the study took place over a two-year

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<sup>2</sup> Two of the twelve schools initially selected discontinued their involvement in the study between first and second year. In order to capture diversity across different school contexts, two additional schools were asked to participate in the second year of the study. These schools were chosen on the basis of the dimensions originally used to select the schools for the study of first year students.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘quasi-compulsory’ is used to refer to schools where all students, except those entering the LCA programme, are required to take Transition Year.

period. In January 2006, all fifth year<sup>4</sup> students were surveyed in schools without Transition Year and all Transition Year students were surveyed in schools with compulsory Transition Year. In schools with optional Transition Year, both Transition Year and fifth year students were surveyed. In January 2007, fifth year students in compulsory Transition Year schools and fifth year students in optional Transition Year schools were surveyed (see Figure 1.1). In schools where Transition Year was optional, students who proceeded directly to fifth year were in classes with students who had taken Transition Year the previous year. In this case, all of the fifth year classes were surveyed to minimise disruption, including students who were not part of the original cohort, increasing the total number of students surveyed. In order to obtain a ‘snap-shot’ of the experiences of fifth year students, information from two years (2006 and 2007) was merged in order to provide a complete picture.

**Table 1.1: Profile of the case-study schools**

School	Size	Sector	Social Mix
Argyle Street	Large	Community/Comprehensive	Mixed
Barrack Street	Small	Girls’ Secondary	Working Class
Belmore Street	Large	Girls’ Secondary	Mixed
Dawes Point	Small	Boys’ Secondary	Working Class
Dawson Street	Medium	Community/Comprehensive	Mixed
Dixon Street	Large	Vocational	Working Class
Fig Lane	Large	Coeducational Secondary (Fee-paying)	Middle Class
Harris Street	Large	Girls’ Secondary	Middle Class
Hay Street	Small	Vocational	Working Class
Lang Street	Small	Vocational	Working Class
Park Street	Large	Boys’ Secondary	Mixed
Wattle Street	Small	Boys’ Secondary	Mixed

*Note:* Pseudonyms are used to represent the case-study schools.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the schools differ in the nomenclature used for different year groups. For purposes of consistency, we refer to students in the first year of a Leaving Certificate programme as ‘fifth years’.



**Figure 1.1: Research design for the student survey**

Year 1 (2006)		Year 2 (2007)
Transition Year students (compulsory TY)	→	Fifth year students
Transition Year students (optional TY)	→	Fifth year students (along with direct entrants from later cohort)
Fifth year students (optional TY schools along with entrants from TY)		
Fifth year students (no TY in school)		

Questionnaires on fifth year experiences were completed by 840 students from the study cohort. The survey data were complemented by focus group interviews conducted in March 2006 and 2007 by the authors of the study. Within each school, a group of six students from each class was randomly chosen and interviewed within their class groups. A total of 18 group interviews were conducted with Transition Year students and 62 group interviews with fifth year students. In the interviews, the students reflected on their experiences of making the transition from junior to senior cycle. The interviews also explored students' choice of programmes and subjects. These interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were later analysed using the QSR NVivo7 package to identify the emerging themes. Systematic analyses of the interview and survey data form the core of this study; throughout the text, quotes are used to illustrate the patterns found among students in general or among particular groups of students.

Information gathered from students was complemented by in-depth interviews carried out with staff members who had the closest contact with Transition Year and fifth year students, including the principal, the guidance counsellor(s), the year head for fifth year and programme coordinators for TY, Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. These interviews focused on staff perceptions of the transition to senior cycle along with the nature of support structures for students and approaches to ability grouping. Some 65 interviews were conducted with key personnel in the case-study schools.

These interviews were recorded, transcribed and later analysed using the QSR NVivo7 package.

In this book, we focus on presenting the perspectives of Transition Year and fifth year students among the cohort of young people we have been following since junior cycle. Building upon this research at junior cycle, we address the following questions:

- How does taking Transition Year influence student experiences of school and the transition into fifth year?
- What factors influence choice of programmes and subjects on entry to senior cycle?
- Do teaching and learning processes vary across Leaving Certificate programmes?
- How satisfied are students with the programmes and subjects they are taking?
- How do students' experiences at junior cycle influence their transition to, and experiences within, senior cycle?

In answering these questions, the study will provide insights into key policy issues relating to the transition from junior to senior cycle.

### **1.5 Outline of the Study**

Chapter Two explores the types of students who take Transition Year, their experiences of the programme while taking it and their subsequent reflections on the programme when they have moved into fifth year. In Chapter Three, we explore the choice of Leaving Certificate programmes, the role of guidance in this process, and the profile and learning experiences of participants on the different pathways. Chapter Four addresses the choice of Leaving Certificate subjects and the extent to which student choices are influenced by prior choices and experiences at junior cycle level. Chapter Five examines student choice of subject levels within senior cycle and the extent to which take-up of higher level varies across different groups of students. In Chapter Six, we explore the nature of the changeover to senior cycle and the extent to

which student attitudes to school alter over this transition. Chapter Seven outlines the main findings of the study and discusses the implications for policy development.

## *Chapter Two*

# **THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the experiences of students taking the Transition Year (TY) programme. The programme is intended to encourage a variety of non-academic skills and competencies, with a focus on personal and social skills and self-directed learning which acts to prepare students for adult life. An innovative aspect of TY is the flexibility for schools to design a programme which suits their own needs and for teachers themselves to develop particular courses or modules. Previous research indicated that schools vary in the number and type of subject areas provided (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). The vast majority of schools provide academic subjects, cultural studies, sports and leisure, ICT studies, civic/social studies and work-related learning. Some schools also provide access to third-level taster courses, personal development courses and practical skills.

In this chapter, we explore the experiences of Transition Year among the students in the case-study schools. The first section explores the provision of TY in the case-study schools and the reasons for choosing to provide the programme. The second section examines the profile of students taking the programme while the third section presents the reasons for taking, or not taking, the programme. The subsequent sections look at the learning experiences of Transition Year students and their perceptions of the programme during and after taking it.

## 2.2 Rationale for the Provision and Non-provision of Transition Year

Transition Year is provided in seven of the twelve case-study schools, with three of the schools providing the programme on a compulsory or quasi-compulsory<sup>1</sup> basis (Table 2.1). Key personnel in the schools providing TY were generally positive about the programme. The interviews with school staff<sup>2</sup> explored the reasons for not providing TY or for providing it on an optional or compulsory basis.

In the three schools providing TY on a compulsory (or quasi-compulsory) basis, namely, Harris Street, Wattle Street and Lang Street, the desire to make the benefits of the programme available to all students as well as logistical constraints were the main motivating factors. In Harris Street, TY had been provided on a compulsory basis since its introduction to the school. The advantages were seen in terms of facilitating student maturity, providing a break from study as well as enhancing career orientation for all students:

Children, I think, are young enough leaving school and if they can put that extra year and explore different areas, and, perhaps, make mistakes with their perceived career and realise that no, that's not for me, then I think that's a value in itself. But they're that year older. They get the break between the two you know and a lot of them here, thankfully and we're very lucky and I'll have to admit that, a lot of them, particularly girls, spend a lot of time studying and they do work very hard. So to get that break, and that gap, I think it's fantastic. (Harris Street, staff, girls' school, middle-class intake, compulsory TY)

The desire to enhance the maturity of all students was also a factor in Lang Street, a working-class boys' school:

A lot of students wouldn't have appreciated what it could do for them and a lot of them would be somewhat immature ... And also after a number of years of doing it and having met the sixth years in

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<sup>1</sup> 'Quasi-compulsory' refers to the way in which all students, except those taking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, were required to take TY.

<sup>2</sup> In the remainder of the study, all key personnel are referred to as 'staff' rather than their specific role within the school to ensure their anonymity.

their final number of months and having surveyed sixth years, it was quite clear from their responses that the Transition Year benefited them greatly, in every sense now, from an educational sense, from an academic sense but on a personal, mature level as well. It moved them up another year and gave another year of maturity before they approached the Leaving Certificate. And subsequently then when they go on to third level, they're that year older to approach third level, there's a lot of logic behind it you know. (Lang Street, staff, boys' school, working-class intake, quasi-compulsory TY)

**Table 2.1: Provision of Transition Year in the case-study schools**

School	Size	Sector	Social Mix	Transition Year
Argyle Street	Large	Community/ Comprehensive	Mixed	Optional
Barrack Street	Small	Girls' Secondary	Working Class	Optional
Belmore Street	Large	Girls' Secondary	Mixed	Optional
Dawes Point	Small	Boys' Secondary	Working Class	Not Offered
Dawson Street	Medium	Community/ Comprehensive	Mixed	Not Offered
Dixon Street	Large	Vocational	Working Class	Not Offered
Fig Lane	Large	Coeducational Secondary (Fee-paying)	Middle Class	Optional
Harris Street	Large	Girls' Secondary	Middle Class	Compulsory
Hay Street	Small	Vocational	Working Class	Not Offered
Lang Street	Small	Vocational	Working Class	Quasi-compulsory
Park Street	Large	Boys' Secondary	Mixed	Not Offered
Wattle Street	Small	Boys' Secondary	Mixed	Compulsory

In Wattle Street and Lang Street, small school size was seen as constraining the capacity to offer TY on an optional basis:

Our numbers are very small. ... It would be very hard to have ... three subjects on an option line and then have Transition Year at the same time, so I think really, we're too small for that to happen. (Wattle Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake, compulsory TY)

Four of the schools provided TY on an optional basis. This was seen as advantageous as the programme is 'not suitable for everyone':

I don't think it would suit everybody, you know what I mean, the type of year it is and that gives people the option then to whether they want it or not, and so I say it's probably a good thing, yeah [for it to be optional]. (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake, optional TY)

Thus, staff in optional TY schools stressed the importance of providing diverse pathways for students with different needs and interests:

Well if a student wants, chooses to go ahead, you know I don't see any big problem with going ahead if they want to, they can have all their own reasons, could be family reasons, social reasons, community reasons, there could be reasons for their own education, they feel that they're capable of going ahead and that they want out of education, for all kinds of things that go through their heads. And some of them feel 'I'll do better in two years than if I take a year out and I'll find it very difficult to get back into study'. (Belmore Street, staff, girls' school, mixed intake, optional TY)

Where students actively choose TY, they are seen as more actively engaged in the coursework and activities involved:

I think the fact that it is optional actually makes the programme stronger rather than the programme being mandatory. I like the idea that students go into it having made the choice to do the programme, it definitely impacts on their own commitment to the course. (Argyle Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake, optional TY)

One of the schools not providing TY at the time of the study was planning to introduce it. As with the schools providing the programme, their

rationale for doing so was mainly couched in terms of the benefits of an extra year in school for student maturity:

The fact that they're young, they're not reaching their potential, that there is a lot of demands from school, that this is a good year to learn other skills, without the pressure of the end of the year, or the end of year exam, but more continuous assessments. And the other one as well is that it's a kind of a good year to get their heads sorted, because at the time, you know, like adolescence, after doing their Junior Cert most of them go and get part-time jobs, most of them start going out to discos a hell of a lot more often, boys and girls are on the scene, there is so much going on that sometimes you just need that little bit of breathing space. And even though they will be still working, and working very hard, it will be in a different sort of way. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake, optional TY)

In the four remaining schools, non-provision of TY was motivated by two sets of factors: school size and student composition. Staff in two of the schools reported logistical constraints relating to school size:

The numbers in the school are very small ... if we had Transition Year then our number going into fifth year would be even smaller again so I don't know how feasible it would be to run it. (Dixon Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

The fact that our numbers are low here, the Transition Year would really affect the subject choice. (Dawes Point, staff, boys' school, working-class intake)

In addition, some schools perceived TY to be unsuitable for their student intake. For schools serving more disadvantaged student populations, an extra year in school was seen as having potential negative effects on student retention to Leaving Certificate level:

If we introduced a Transition Year, we keep them for that year but there's an increased chance of losing them to Leaving Cert. In other words, they will reach sixteen in Transition Year, they won't have begun the Leaving Cert programme and we thought that we'd lose them. So we kind of said on balance we would stay as we are at the moment. (Dawes Point, staff, boys' school, working-class intake, TY not offered)



In fact, two of the working-class schools had provided TY in the past but subsequently discontinued it because of these concerns:

We did try out Transition Year a number of years ago. ... We had a share of the weaker students and because of the work experience element of the Transition Year when they did go out on work experience they got the taste for the life outside. And they were more inclined to leave school rather than continue. And for that reason we felt that you know it wasn't a great option for us as a school. (Hay Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake, TY not offered)

In sum, the case-study schools providing Transition Year were motivated by the desire to enhance maturity and provide students with a break from study. In keeping with previous research (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004), not providing the programme was related to logistical constraints and to the perceived unsuitability of TY for more disadvantaged groups of students.

### **2.3 Who Takes Transition Year?**

Among the cohort of students entering senior cycle in the case-study schools, 40 per cent took the TY programme while the remainder entered the first year of a Leaving Certificate programme. Table 2.2 indicates the factors associated with TY participation using a multilevel logistic regression model. A multilevel model is used to take account of the fact that students within a school are likely to share common characteristics and experiences (see Goldstein, 1999). In the table, a significant positive coefficient indicates that a factor is associated with increased likelihood of taking TY while a significant negative coefficient indicates reduced chances of taking the programme. Previous research has indicated that TY participants are disproportionately drawn from students who are already quite engaged in school and likely to do well academically (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). These patterns are confirmed by analysis of the current student cohort.

The first set of models compares the characteristics of those entering TY with all other students across all of the case-study schools, including the schools which do not provide the programme. This allows us to explore the types of students who are exposed to the programme. Female

students are somewhat more likely to take part in TY but this is due to their higher educational aspirations and lower levels of misbehaviour. Social class differences in participation are not found to be significant. Older students are much less likely to take TY compared with their younger counterparts. Students in lower stream classes are very unlikely to take TY. Students who report higher levels of misbehaviour (and consequently more negative interaction with their teachers) are less likely to take part in TY than other students. Among the whole cohort of students, educational aspirations and Junior Certificate exam performance are not significantly associated with the likelihood of taking TY.

**Table 2.2: Take-up of Transition Year (multilevel logistic regression model)**

	All Schools	Schools with Optional TY
Constant	-0.472	-0.220
Female	0.321	0.346
Social class:		
Higher professional	0.328	0.453
Lower professional	0.242	0.383
Non-manual	0.502	0.912
Skilled manual	0.252	0.500
Non-employed	0.097	0.466
Farmer	0.431	0.924
(Base: semi/unskilled manual)		
Age (centred on mean)	-0.390*	-0.790**
Lower stream class (Base: All other class types)	-1.365*	
Misbehaviour in third year	-0.292*	-0.712***
Educational aspirations in third year:		
Leaving Certificate	0.156	0.367
Sub-degree	0.356	0.859 $\neg$
Degree	0.410	0.869 $\neg$
(Base: Junior Certificate)		
Junior Cert Grade Point Average (centred on mean)	0.106	0.217*

Note: \*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05,  $\neg$  p<0.10.

The second set of models is confined to those schools with an optional TY programme, allowing us to compare the profile of participants and non-participants in the same school setting. Female students are somewhat more likely to take TY than their male counterparts, but once again this pattern is accounted for by gender differences in misbehaviour and aspirations. Variation by social class background is not significant when other student characteristics are taken into account. Older students and those with records of misbehaviour are less likely to enter TY. Within schools with optional TY, TY participants differ significantly from non-participants in their engagement with school. Firstly, they are likely to have much higher educational aspirations; those who want to go on to third-level education are three times as likely as other students to take TY. Secondly, those who have achieved higher grades in their Junior Certificate exam are more likely to take TY. Given that previous research has indicated a performance gain from taking TY (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004), the benefits are therefore likely to accrue to those who are already relatively advantaged within the schooling system.

#### **2.4 Reasons for Participation or Non-participation in Transition Year**

In the four schools where students had a choice as to whether to take Transition Year or not, students were asked about the reasons for their choice. Among those who chose to do TY, the dominant reason given was to have a break from studying between the Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes:

I wouldn't be able to go into fifth year after me Junior and all that and just start studying all over again so I needed the year anyway, just to relax. (Barrack Street, TY optional, current TY, girls' school, working-class intake)

One group of girls vividly described how knowing they would take Transition Year made the pressure of preparing for the Junior Certificate exam more tolerable:

Being in third year and seeing what the Transition Years were doing when you're kind of stressed out and under pressure in third year ... and you're kind of, I'll be doing that next year.

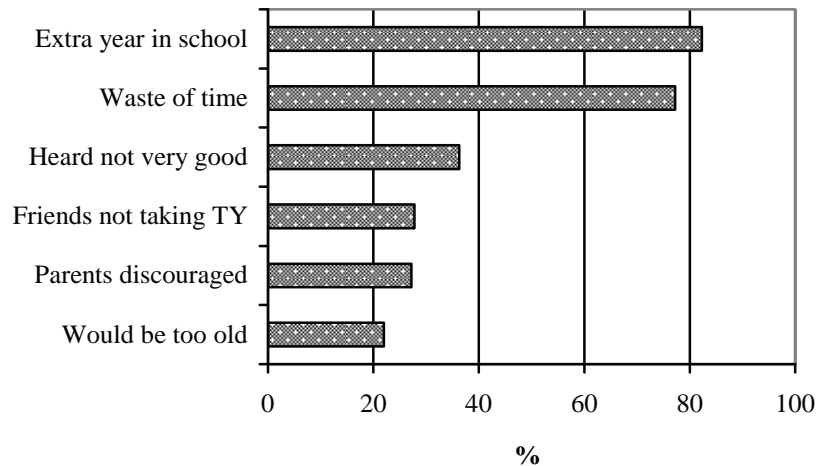
... It kind of made you get through the day that you were doing, we all had really crap days and you see that they're heading off somewhere or they're doing something ... it's the easy way of looking at third year like, knowing that there's something good at the end of it. (Belmore Street, TY optional, current TY, girls' school, mixed intake)

A major attraction for students was the opportunity to engage in various activities and trips and to try out different subject areas. The extra year in school was also seen as an advantage in deciding what subjects to study for the Leaving Certificate and what options to pursue after leaving school: 'to see what you wanted to do in your future career, do work experience and stuff' (Belmore Street, optional TY, current TY, girls' school, mixed intake). As indicated in Table 2.1 above, age was also a factor, since many students felt they would otherwise be "too young" on leaving school (Argyle Street, TY optional, current TY, coed school, mixed intake):

We were all only 15 more or less so it's very young to decide what you are going to do for the rest of your life. This gives us time to think. (Belmore Street, TY optional, current TY, girls' school, mixed intake)

Finally, friendship patterns played a role since some students reported choosing TY because their friends were also taking the programme. However, this was not a decisive reason since many students reported making different choices to those in their friendship groups.

In the survey of students, students who had not taken TY were given a series of possible reasons for their decision. The majority of students felt that they did not want to spend an extra year in school and thought that TY would be a 'waste of time' (see Figure 2.1). Only a minority of students attributed their decision to the influence of friends or family. While only a fifth of students explicitly based their decision on the fact that they would be too old leaving school, age differences were clearly distinguishable between participants and non-participants (see Table 2.1).

**Figure 2.1: Reasons for not taking Transition Year**

Students in the focus groups were also asked about their reasons for non-participation in TY. Their reasons were varied but largely echoed the survey findings. As the quantitative analysis and interviews with key personnel highlight, many students, especially those in working-class schools, were keen to complete their education as quickly as possible:

I would've done it, I love all sports and everything like that but the thought of putting another year in school just killed me. (Barrack Street, TY optional, non-TY, girls' school, working-class intake)

This group of students felt that they would gain little from an extra year in school and would be better served by entering fifth year immediately after the junior cycle:

*Interviewer:* Why did you decide not to [take TY]?

I just didn't want to, I thought it was a waste of a year as well, I'd hate to be in fifth year thinking I could have been in sixth year finishing. (Argyle Street, TY optional, non-TY, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students were worried that participating in TY would mean it would be much harder to return to studying and the demands of the

Leaving Certificate curriculum after the relative freedom and lack of pressure offered by fourth year.

You're risking your life when you do fourth year, that's what I was like ... Because like during fourth year you do build up a social life because like you don't have much to do, you've no homework or anything, you get to go out with all your mates and all, you get to know them better, you do build up a lot more social life and then when you come back it's all work. That's the thing why I didn't do fourth year. It's harder to come back. (Barrack Street, TY optional, non-TY, girls' school, working-class intake)

One school's plans to introduce TY in the following academic year drew criticism from some students, who argued that TY might lead to drop-out, owing to the lack of strict timetabling and less demanding work schedule.

Because probably you feel like dropping out after another extra year after the Junior Cert ... in Transition Year like you're not doing the work, you have to do like projects and that, that's going to be like not working, and then that might lead them on to dropping out. (Dawson Street, TY not offered, non-TY, coed school, mixed intake)

As the survey findings indicated, friendship groups and age were also important factors in explaining students' non-participation in TY. A frequently cited reason for progressing directly into fifth year and not taking TY was because 'my friends weren't doing it' (Fig Lane, TY optional, non-TY, coed school, middle-class intake):

I would have done it but no one else was doing it, every one of my friends was going into fifth year so I said I'd go, it wouldn't have mattered to me but I prefer that I'm in fifth year now than wasting another year.

I would love to have done it if all my friends were doing it. (Argyle Street, TY optional, non-TY, coed school, mixed intake)

In addition, many students worried that they would be 'too old' leaving school if they took TY.

*Interviewer:* Why did you decide to go straight into fifth year rather than do Transition Year?

... Didn't want to be in school any longer than I have to, I'd be nineteen then leaving, I don't want to be nineteen leaving.

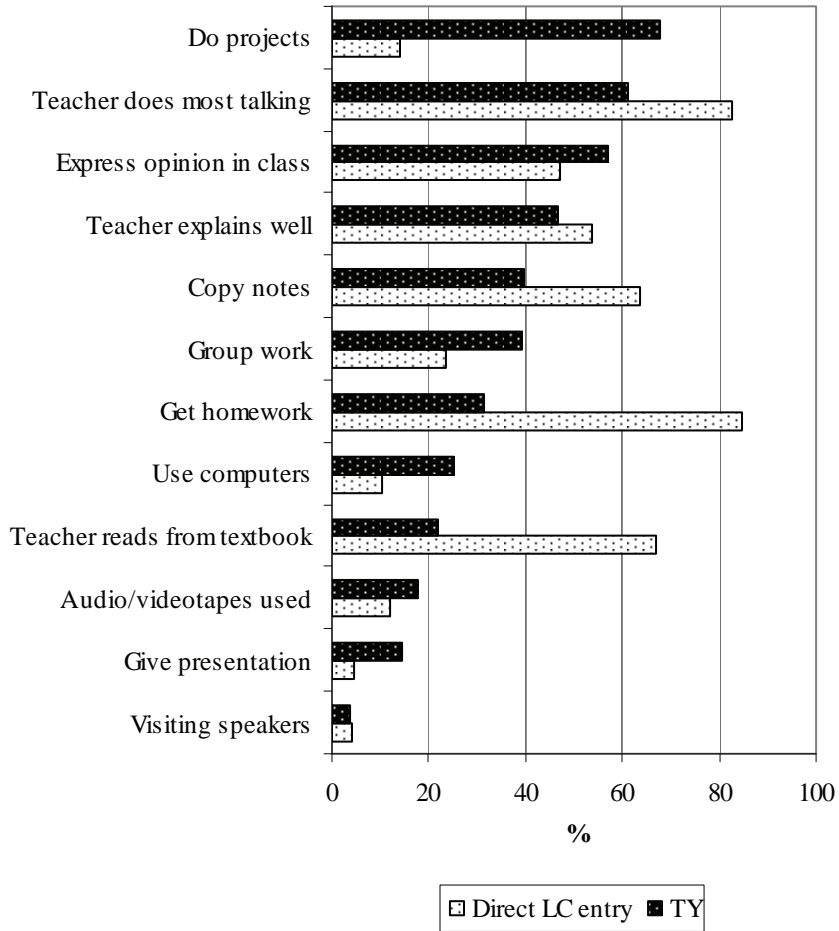
Yeah the same ... I'd be twenty if I was to do it. (Belmore Street, TY optional, non-TY, girls' school, mixed intake)

## **2.5 Learning Experiences among Transition Year Students**

The previous section indicated that access to new kinds of learning experiences was a factor in choosing to do Transition Year. Comparing the use of different teaching methods in TY classes and in the first year of the Leaving Certificate programme can yield insights into the extent to which TY provides students with different learning experiences (see Figure 2.2). It should be noted that methods may vary between different Leaving Certificate (LC) programmes, an issue that is discussed in the following chapter. There are clear differences between TY and LC classes: TY students are more likely to do project work, express their opinion in class, and engage in group work in every lesson or most lessons compared with LC students. They are also more likely to use computer facilities and audio/videotapes in class, though these facilities are used regularly in only a minority of classes. On the other hand, LC classes are more likely to involve the teacher doing most of the talking, the teacher reading from a textbook, students copying notes from the board and receiving homework.

While TY students appear to be more active participants in class work and are exposed to a greater variety of teaching methods, a significant minority (four out of ten) report regularly copying notes from the board and in the majority of TY classes, the teachers do most of the talking.

**Figure 2.2: Use of different teaching methods (per cent ‘every lesson’/ ‘most lessons’), comparing TY participants and those who entered a Leaving Certificate programme**

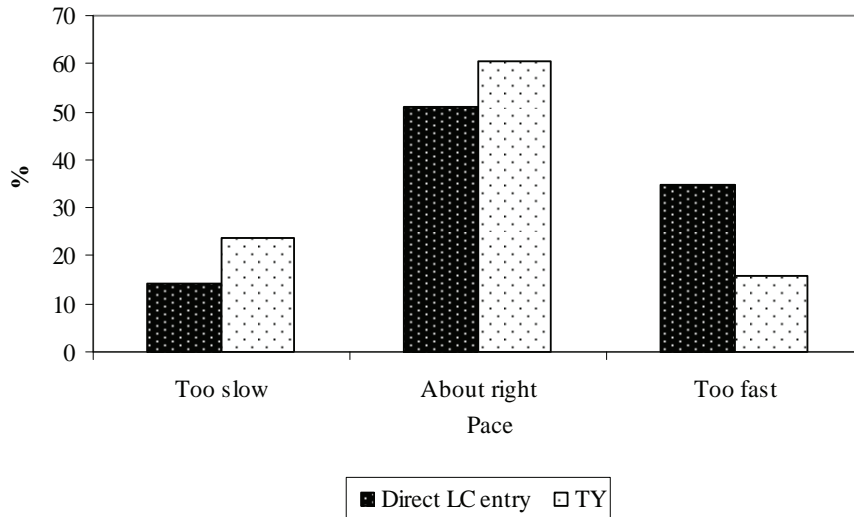


TY participants were more likely than those entering a Leaving Certificate programme to be satisfied with the pace of instruction in their classes; 60 per cent of TY students felt the pace was ‘about right’ compared with half of LC students (Figure 2.3). Where TY students were dissatisfied with the pace of instruction, they were more likely to find it too slow than too fast. In contrast, LC entrants were more likely to see the pace of instruction as too fast rather than too slow. Among both TY



and LC students, female students were more likely to be satisfied with the pace of instruction than their male counterparts. Furthermore, those who had received higher Junior Certificate grades were more likely to be satisfied with the pace of instruction while those who had received lower grades were more likely to find the pace too fast.

**Figure 2.3: Perceived pace of instruction, comparing TY participants and those who entered a Leaving Certificate programme**



In general, comparing TY with third year, students reported that TY was 'easier' (76 per cent), that they spent less time on homework (88 per cent) and that teachers were more easy-going (66 per cent). Students in schools with compulsory TY were less likely than those in optional TY schools to find schoolwork easier and spend less time on homework. Looking at the actual amount of time students report spending on homework, a significant difference is found between TY participants and LC entrants, with an average of 46 minutes per evening compared with 87 minutes. Even within the same school (that is, schools with optional TY), LC entrants spend more time on homework/study than those in TY. However, the amount of time spent on homework during TY is found to vary across the case-study schools.

Students were also asked about their learning experiences and the approaches to teaching during TY during the focus group interviews. Many were enthusiastic about the range of different activities and the fact that TY made fewer demands in terms of schoolwork compared to the Junior Certificate.

*Interviewer:* What do you like best this year in terms of classes or activities?

Just like the amount of stuff you can do because I think the different things, it's great changing subjects.

...

You don't have to do so much work.

I think this year there's lots more to do but like it wasn't as time-tabled as third year, you have to study now and you have to do that, you can do after school stuff like Woodwork and then you can go out with your friends. And then there's courses in school, like there's the trip, I can't wait to go on that, that's a week off school and you just get to do adventure stuff. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Most students felt that the pace of fourth year was much slower and more relaxed than their Junior Certificate year. They described the year as being 'laid back ... not as much pressure on you' (Fig Lane, TY optional, current TY, coed school, middle-class intake) and as being 'easier' (Argyle Street, TY optional, current TY, coed school, mixed intake). TY students received less homework but were required to balance deadlines in order to complete project work:

There's less kind of like homework on a daily basis but like you do get a lot of projects like and you've to put a lot of work into them. (Fig Lane, TY optional, current TY, coed school, middle-class intake)

Some students reported a last minute approach to project work and the stress associated with the fact that there was less close teacher supervision: 'you can do that when you want' (Belmore Street, TY optional, non-TY, girls' school, mixed intake).

So like if you get stressed it's your own fault, you're doing so much stuff or if you did nothing and get no credit it's your own fault as well.

Fourth year is what you make of it. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Many students were enthusiastic about the different approaches to teaching during Transition Year, especially being given greater input into the topics to be covered in class and teachers being 'more open to doing different things' (Fig Lane, TY optional, current TY, coed school, middle-class intake).

They're [teachers are] not like telling you, you have to do this, you have to do that, it's would you like to do that, would you like to do...

They ask for your opinion, would you like to do something in particular and then they'll do that with us.

Without telling us that you have to do this, "open page 4" like. (Argyle Street, TY optional, current TY, coed school, mixed intake)

In general, students were positive about the fact that their classes were not as reliant on the traditional methods of teaching that they had experienced throughout junior cycle: 'Classes aren't all about learning, they're about fun stuff' (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake) and 'It's more about enjoyment than learning' (Fig Lane, TY optional, current TY, coed school, middle-class intake). There was appreciation of this new approach, with its reduced emphasis on rote learning: 'Like you're learning it but you know that you don't really have to know it off by heart or anything' (Belmore Street, TY optional, non-TY, girls' school, mixed intake). Science was particularly mentioned by students as being more engaging and interesting than it had been at junior cycle level.

*Interviewer:* So what do you like best this year in terms of classes or activities?

Science is new because we get to do experiments.

Yeah, Science is good this year.

Science is really good.

You see that's we're learning through a different way because you don't really get to do experiments [in Science] or we didn't for the Junior Cert ... Something interesting like that will stay in your head and you'll always remember it. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

While some students reported that there was an increased emphasis on group work during TY, others complained that some classes were over-reliant on teacher-dominated approaches, such as taking notes from the board.

She [the teacher] put up a projector thing and we just take down absolutely everything from the board and she never talks about anything, she'd never explain anything, just actually have to take down everything. (Argyle Street, TY optional, current TY, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students spoke of the increased emphasis on self-directed learning during TY and on the need to take responsibility for themselves and organise their own work, with teachers expecting students to 'go and learn it yourself' (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake).

Improved interaction with teachers during TY was reported by a number of students, focusing on teachers being more 'open minded' and 'relaxed' which had many benefits, including feeling able to ask for help if needed: 'You're not afraid to ask the teachers, I used to be like, no, not asking, but now it's grand' (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake).

In sum, taking TY allows students access to a broader range of learning experiences and teaching styles than those directly entering a Leaving Certificate programme. Active involvement in group-work and project work along with greater input into what is covered in class are seen by the students as enhancing their engagement and learning. In keeping with previous research (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004), however, there is still some use of more didactic methods, though this varies across schools and teachers.

## 2.6 Subject Provision within Transition Year

There is considerable diversity across the case-study schools in terms of the breadth and variety of their TY programmes, in keeping with previous research (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). Interviews with key personnel reveal that programmes vary structurally but comprise 'core' and optional subjects. The core subjects, English, Mathematics and Irish, often along with a modern language and science, are run throughout the entire year. Alongside this, students may have the choice of other subjects, which may be either elective and/or rotated in 'blocks' of a specific number of weeks. The optional subjects may include a diverse range of topics, including photography, speech and drama, business studies, film studies, art and woodwork. Students themselves were asked about the number of subjects, modules or activities they were taking in TY. The most extensive provision was found in Harris Street, a girls' school with compulsory TY, where students took an average of twenty subjects. The most restrictive programme was found in Wattle Street, a boys' school with compulsory TY, where students took an average of seven subjects. Around half of the students reported having a choice of subjects in TY, a pattern that was somewhat less common in schools with compulsory TY.

School size and resources, including the approach of the individual TY co-ordinator, were often important factors determining the flexibility and scope for change within the programme content from year to year:

It is open to some flexibility based on the Transition Year coordinator, that's a fair impact on what they'll have. Quite often depends on the energy, the wide variety of skills that a coordinator would have. (Lang Street, staff, boys' school, working-class intake, quasi-compulsory TY).

In some schools, the focus was on providing a broad programme of subjects and activities which exposed the students to a wide variety of different types of subjects and styles of learning.

I think we have a popular programme ... When we have our presentation night of certificates ... you know, it is a very good representation of what's good about schooling ... It is a gap year, it is substantially a gap year. I mean they do have a wide range of experiences to which they are exposed. There is also a wide range of forms of

teaching going on and there is a very strong portfolio work going on. So most of the students work it into a portfolio which is assessed at the end of the year by the teachers. (Argyle Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake, optional TY)

TY was characterised as providing a valuable opportunity to encourage students with regards to self-directed learning and, in addition, to develop their intellectual capacities beyond what was construed as the confines of a two-year curriculum geared towards a written examination.

I would see the objectives as producing a kind of more balanced student at the end of it and producing a student that was more self-directed in doing their work. I mean the junior cycle is very much you know a teacher-emphasised course where teachers go in and they teach a course, whereas in this case like the Transition Year process it's about moving them away from that, about broadening their interests ... broadening the curriculum. You know engineering the curriculum towards what we feel are the needs of the students and what we'd like to see obviously at the end of it are students which are more confident, more balanced, more self-directed in their approach to learning. You know they get probably their first real idea of collaborative learning in Transition Year. We'd like to see if we could produce somebody at the end of it who has a much broader attitude to education. (Harris Street, staff, girls' school, middle-class intake, compulsory TY)

I think that is the case like secondary education ... at one level they are asked to do some extremely difficult material that they never understand but that they master in terms of regurgitating right ... So that is one side of the coin. On the other side of the coin, we don't challenge them where they can be challenged ... I think the kids can cope with a lot more ... I took them for Economics a few years ago, I was amazed at what they could understand like. I did you know Ricardo, Marx and Adam Smith and people like that and they had no problem understanding it. We didn't write a thing but we understood it ... And I think we tend to think that young people cannot understand these concepts, they can. And they need to be introduced because where else are they going to, and in a sense Transition Year provides an ideal opportunity to look at these issues you know. (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake)

However, while some schools focused on the opportunity to emphasise personal development and challenging the students outside the regular curriculum demands, other schools use the year primarily to create a bridge or link between the junior and senior cycle curriculum. In one school, this resulted in a more academic focus and a less diverse programme than in other schools:

We got an awful lot of pressure from parents over the years that they didn't want all this kind of modular stuff in the Transition Year for their boys ... they wanted an academic Transition Year and as close as possible to the Leaving Certificate programme. And we have kind of gone that way, but we superimpose, you know, all the other modules in on top of that, so it's not completely academic but within classroom situations I suppose it's very much for the Leaving Cert. (Wattle Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake, compulsory TY)

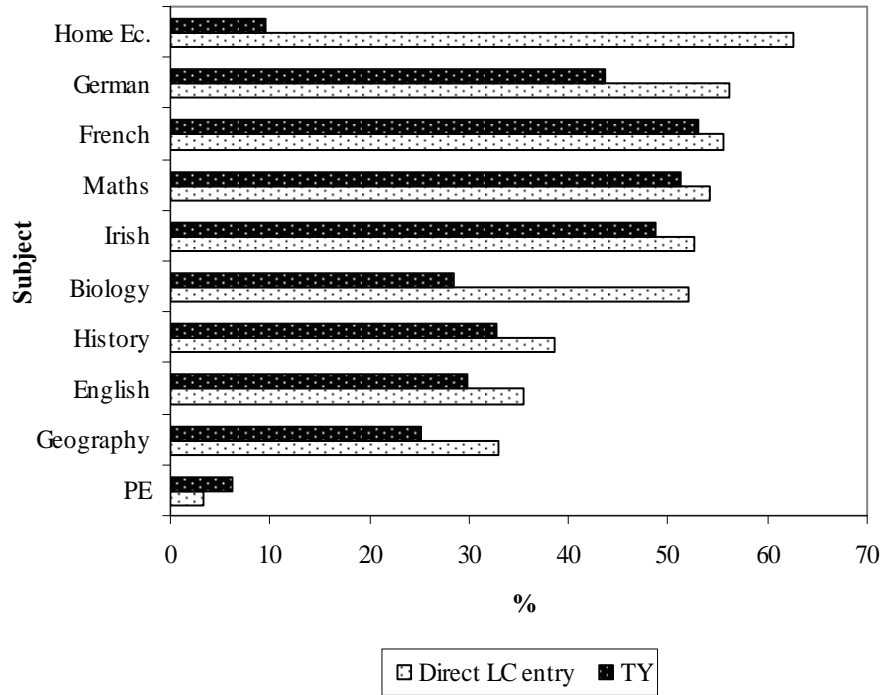
### *2.6.1 Student Perspectives on Programme Content*

There was a good deal of variation in the subjects students reported liking in TY. Over half of students mentioned a range of 'new' Transition Year subjects as opposed to subjects which represented a continuation from junior cycle or a lead-in to Leaving Certificate. Leisure Studies (22 per cent) and Art (20 per cent) were also mentioned by significant proportions of students. A third of students reported that they disliked at least one of the 'new' subjects, although they varied greatly in the subjects cited. A significant proportion also reported disliking the traditional 'academic' subjects: Irish (25 per cent), Maths (23 per cent), French (13 per cent), English (12 per cent) and Science (10 per cent).

Students were asked about their perceptions of specified subjects in terms of difficulty, interest and usefulness. Figure 2.4 contrasts the responses of TY students and students who entered a Leaving Certificate programme. The relative ranking of subjects in terms of difficulty is broadly similar for the two groups, with languages (French, German and Irish) and Maths seen as the most difficult. A marked difference occurs in relation to Home Economics; only a very small proportion (10 per cent) of TY participants view this subject as difficult but the majority of

those on Leaving Certificate programmes do so. Biology is also seen as much more difficult by LC students than by those in TY.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 2.4: Perceived subject difficulty, comparing TY participants and those who entered a Leaving Certificate programme**

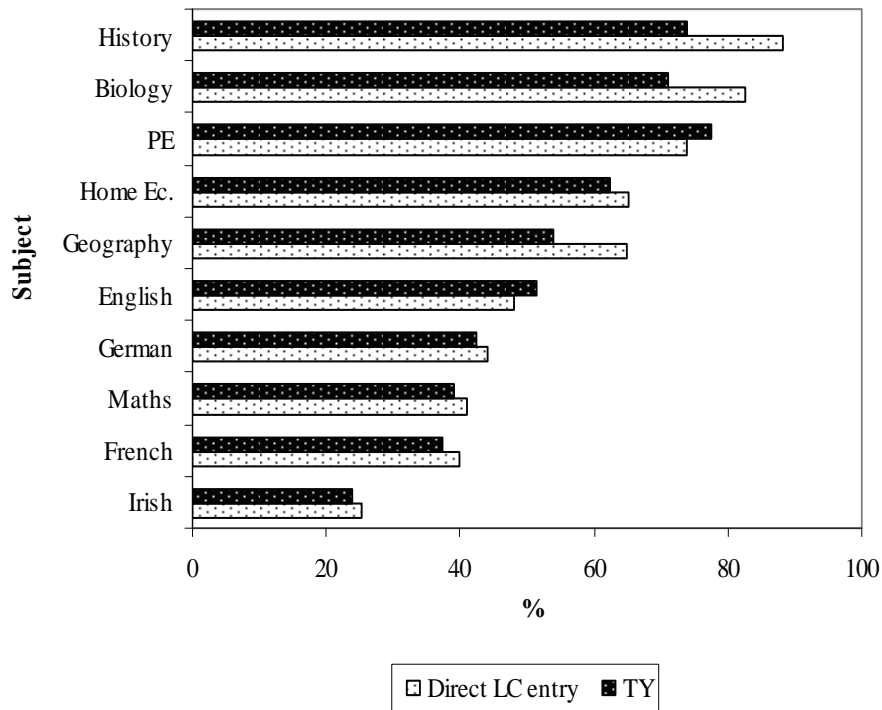


Among the specified subjects, History, Biology and PE were seen as the most interesting subjects with the languages and Maths provoking lower levels of interest (Figure 2.5). For Biology, History and Geography, levels of interest were much higher among TY participants than among LC students.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter Four explores attitudes to Leaving Certificate subjects in greater depth. The perceived difficulty of Home Economics and Biology is largely due to the size of the course to be covered and the amount of material to be learned.

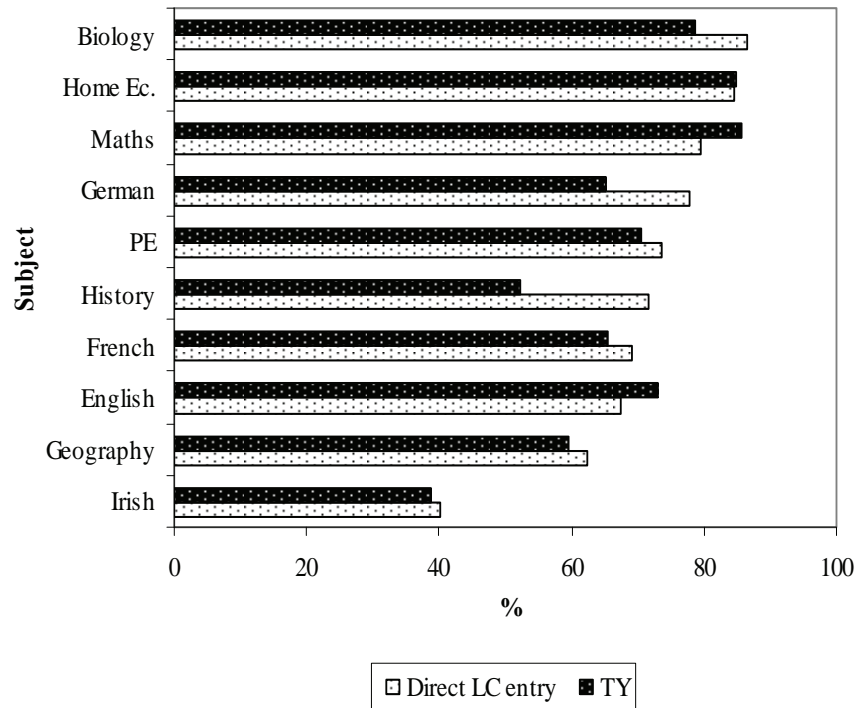


**Figure 2.5: Perceived interest in specified subjects, comparing TY participants and those who entered a Leaving Certificate programme**



Students across both TY and fifth year were more likely to perceive Biology, Home Economics and Maths as useful, and less likely to see Irish as useful. TY participants were somewhat more likely to see Maths as useful than Leaving Certificate entrants, perhaps because of a greater emphasis on ‘real world’ applications (Figure 2.6). In contrast, LC entrants were more likely to see History, German and Biology as useful than TY participants.

**Figure 2.6: Perceived usefulness of specified subjects, comparing TY participants and those who entered a Leaving Certificate programme**



### 2.6.2 Work Experience

All of the schools offering TY had periods of work experience for their students. However, the length of such work experience placements varied across schools, the most common patterns being ten, fifteen or twenty days. During the focus group interviews, work experience placements were often cited as a positive element of the TY programme. They provided a chance to experience working life outside the school environment: 'it really gave you like a taste of working life' (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake). Work experience was seen as of benefit to students in terms of both gaining important 'soft skills', such as communication and working as part of a team, and also enabling students to assess the job in terms of their own career plans.

It just gives you a look at what real life outside this school is like and what you have to look forward to when you get older. (Argyle Street, TY optional, current TY, coed school, mixed intake)

Schools differed in terms of the organisation of work experience during TY. While some schools allocated a number of one or two week blocks, others opted to give over one day a week throughout the school year to work experience. Most students seemed to prefer the block approach, with complaints that one day a week was 'awkward' (Fig Lane, TY optional, current TY, coed school, middle-class intake). Blocks of work experience were seen as giving greater insight into the workplace: 'I liked the one place for two weeks because you get to know it way better' (Argyle Street, TY optional, current TY, coed school, mixed intake) and 'You would get more continuity in the place' (Fig Lane, TY optional, current TY, coed school, middle-class intake).

Students differed in their capacity to organise the placements, with some reporting difficulties in securing placements:

Some of the places they were already taken and it was kind of hard because there's so many people [looking for placements]. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

The use of social networks, including family and friends, was therefore an important way of securing a placement:

*Interviewer:* Was it difficult to find a placement?

Depends where you do it, what like your relatives do or friends of the family and stuff. (Fig Lane, TY optional, current TY, coed school, middle-class intake)

I was doing carpentry with my dad, I thought it was good because he showed me what to do when he was putting up roofs and all that like, doing extensions. (Lang Street, TY quasi-compulsory, current TY, boys' school, working-class intake)

Other students used their part-time job as their work experience placement: 'I have my own job so I just worked there for the week instead'

(Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake).

Some students reported that it was better to organise their own placements to ensure that the experience was directly relevant to their own career ideas and plans. In this way, students would get maximum benefit from their placements.

It's actually better if you find your own placement.

...

You're going into places where you don't know and you're like, if you get to choose yourself, you might know the people in it and it's better, you get to do more stuff there, otherwise they might just put you making coffee and stuff like that. (Belmore Street, TY optional, current TY, girls' school, mixed intake)

The work experience placement was seen as giving students greater insights into what particular jobs would actually be like. In some cases, the placement reaffirmed their interest in pursuing a specific career:

They help you to know if you still want to do that kind of thing, because I went to a primary school and I wanted to be a primary school teacher and I'd love to do that and it made me want to do it even more, I really loved it. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

In other cases, however, students realised that the job was very different to their expectations, causing them to reassess their career direction:

I thought I wanted to do hairdressing but now that I'm actually doing it for two weeks like I have a different view on it ... Because if I didn't do fourth year and do the work experience, I'd probably just would have did the course on hairdressing and then wouldn't like it but now I know what it's like so that's a good thing about it. (Barrack Street, TY optional, current TY, girls' school, working-class intake)

Some students expressed satisfaction with work experience not just because it assisted their career planning but also because it gave them opportunities to secure part-time employment during term-time and/or employment during the holiday period.

You get to find out if you like the job or not because sometimes you can get a job where you think you might want to do when you're older and if you don't like it you'll know not to go near it and you get jobs out of it during the summer and stuff like that as well. (Argyle Street, TY optional, current TY, coed school, mixed intake)

This pattern is in keeping with previous research which indicated a variety of strategies regarding work experience among TY students, with some using the opportunity for 'career sampling' and others securing a route into part-time employment (see Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004).

A number of students were dissatisfied with their work experience placements. Their reasons for dissatisfaction ranged from feeling exploited through to feeling bored, reporting that they had very little to do.

The hotel, we went to the hotel and we did do loads of stuff in that but it was more like slave work and it was not nice.

Yeah, you see loads of people just use and abuse you because they're like oh we have someone in this week so they can do all the hard work.

They give you stuff they don't want to do. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

They just take advantage, they can work you as hard as they want you know. (Wattle Street, TY compulsory, current TY, boys' school, mixed intake)

## **2.7 Perceptions during Transition Year**

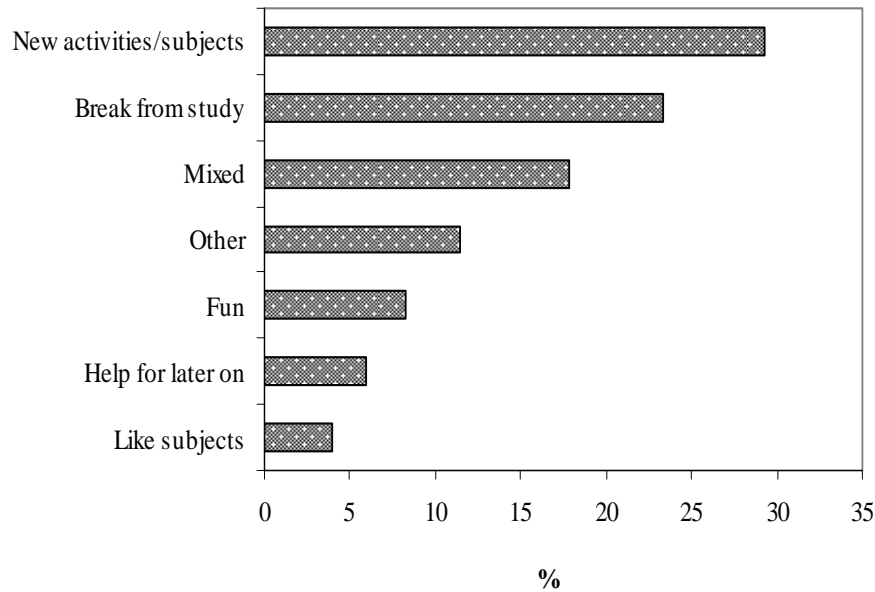
The advantage of a longitudinal study is that we can explore the perceptions of students during and after the TY programme. When surveyed during TY, a quarter of students reported that they were 'very satisfied' with the programme while a further 59 per cent were 'satisfied'; only 17 per cent of students expressed dissatisfaction with the programme. Overall, dissatisfaction levels were higher in schools where the programme was compulsory (21 per cent compared with 12 per cent among those in optional programmes). Among the schools in which the programme was compulsory (or quasi-compulsory), dissatisfaction levels were higher in Lang Street, a working-class school, than in the mixed/middle-class

schools. There was little variation in programme satisfaction across different groups of students, although working-class students in optional TY schools were somewhat more likely than middle-class students to express dissatisfaction. Overall, students who had achieved higher Junior Certificate grades were more likely to be satisfied with TY; the average grade for the 'very satisfied' group was 8.1 compared with 7.3 for the 'very dissatisfied' group. On closer inspection, satisfaction does not vary by grade among those in schools with optional programmes, while the variation is evident among those in schools with compulsory TY.

In the survey, students were asked their reasons for being satisfied or dissatisfied with the programme in an open question. Consistent with their reasons for taking the programme, the most frequent responses related to the opportunity to try out new subjects and activities, and to finding the year relaxing because it provided a break from study and a reduced workload (Figure 2.7). While reporting that they were broadly satisfied with the programme, 18 per cent of students fell into the 'mixed' category, taking the opportunity to mention aspects of the programme with which they were less satisfied, with comments centring on finding some classes 'boring' and on the workload involved. Other reasons for being satisfied with the programme included it being fun, it being of help in terms of later life (for example, with senior cycle subject choices and career options) and liking particular subjects.

The focus group interviews provided more detailed insights into the processes underlying student satisfaction. As already outlined, schools differed considerably in the structure of TY in terms of the subjects undertaken, and the variety of project work and activities organised. For some students, the programme provides a busy and varied set of experiences and opportunities.

I think fourth year is really good time for opportunities, like I mean there's loads of competitions and stuff and we're going to this thing, it's like we're making a film so like you don't get that opportunity in any other year because you're concentrating on your studies too much so there are things like that that are positive. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

**Figure 2.7: Reasons for satisfaction with Transition Year**

For many TY students, the year provides them with the opportunity to try out new subjects and activities that they would not normally get the chance to do. The element of choice was also cited as a positive feature.

You get to choose what you want to do.

And you get to do more things that you wouldn't do usually.

You get to try new things like. (Argyle Street, TY optional, current TY, coed school, mixed intake)

I didn't think there'd be so much in it. We've done so many different things that we would never have done if we had gone straight into fifth year. Probably wouldn't have done them outside the school or anything.

So it gives us more experience. (Barrack Street, TY optional, current TY, girls' school, working-class intake)

The chance to try different subjects before entering the Leaving Certificate programme was seen as facilitating more informed choice and opening up the possibility of making different subject choices:

I wasn't picking business until we did bits of the block this year, I wouldn't even have thought of it and I'm definitely doing it now because I really enjoyed it. So yeah, so it does help you because I found out I want to do business and I didn't know before that and now you do like. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

You might pick a subject, like, you thought that would be good, but when you actually try it, you've no interest in it and actually hate it and there's no point in being stuck with something that after two years you won't put any effort into it. (Fig Lane, TY optional, current TY, coed school, middle-class intake)

More broadly, the year was seen as giving students time and space for reflection about later choices and options without the restrictions and demands of a full curriculum and timetable:

It ... gives you time to sort out what you want to do, think about it, actually think about things. (Belmore Street, TY optional, current TY, girls' school, mixed intake)

In addition to the time for reflection, many students spoke about the career advice offered during the year in positive terms, as being invaluable in terms of helping them to focus on the future.

I know but last year I thought like oh some subjects are easy and I'll definitely go for them but like over the year ... I've like realised that I want to do kind of other stuff so it really prepares you for everything, with the career talks and all you know what subjects you're going to do, before you just had to pick and you're like I don't know what I'm good at or I'll just choose those, we did our DATs [Differential Aptitude Tests] and everything so like.

Yeah, the career guidance is brilliant.

It's really good.

Yeah, you get to see what you're good at and what will help you and stuff. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)



We did a project for guidance on certain careers that you were interested and by now most people have an idea of what kind of course they're going to do when they go to college or university or wherever. You get to find out then more about it and when you think I need this but then you research it and you find out that you might only need this much or you might need more or whatever so we learned from doing our own projects. (Argyle Street, TY optional, current TY, coed school, mixed intake)

Some TY students described the experience of actually visiting a university and seeing a lecture as being very influential in terms of their career ambitions, with third-level teaching styles, size of the lecture halls, subject interest and relative freedom all highlighted as departures from their second-level experience.

I think I was just kind of shocked at how much of a difference it is, there's no uniforms or anything like that and just seeing everyone with laptops and kind of watching the lectures and kind of there's no pressure coming from the lecturers, either you go in and that's it or you just don't bother, but then you can get all your notes off the internet and stuff like that. Even the lecturers, when you go to see them they really make you want to go to college.

...

Because you're getting lectured on what you really want to do and what you're interested in.

But you notice how less interaction there is between lecturer and students and how big they can be, like we saw the biggest lecture room in the college and see that basically your whole school plus extra spare seats, that just shows like what you're going to get in the future. (Wattle Street, TY compulsory, current TY, boys' school, mixed intake)

Other students were positive about the fact that fourth year was more laid back and relaxed, free from the stress and pressure of third year.

*Interviewer:* What do you like best about this year?

Just having lots of fun.

Yeah, everyone is laid back and you don't have homework like, you don't have to be worrying at all. (Belmore Street, TY optional, current TY, girls' school, mixed intake)

Growth in confidence and maturity were seen as two positive benefits arising from taking the TY programme and participating in the different activities provided.

I think more for myself now.

We've grown up sure.

We were kids in third year basically and now we're kind of grown up into young adults. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Many students were positive about the new friends they had made during the TY programme and how the year offered the chance to get to know people they wouldn't normally have communicated with: 'You get to know each other much better' (Fig Lane, TY optional, current TY, coed school, middle-class intake).

*Interviewer:* What do you like best about this year?

Friendships. ... Because you get to know people that you wouldn't really talk to normally, a lot better because you have no choice, you have to get on with things so I thought it was good and you're split up from the rest of the year.

You kind of get to know different people after being in the same class for three years. (Argyle Street, TY optional, current TY, coed school, mixed intake)

Most students were satisfied with the improved relationships with teachers during TY, remarking that teachers treated them more like adults.

*Interviewer:* What about how you get on with teachers, is that any different this year?

I think they trust us a bit more like than they did last year, like they could leave the class and we probably wouldn't wreck it, where last year we probably would have. (Wattle Street, TY compulsory, current TY, boys' school, mixed intake)

While many students reported satisfaction with the TY programme during the focus groups, some students reported being disappointed by TY as there were not as many trips and activities as they had expected.

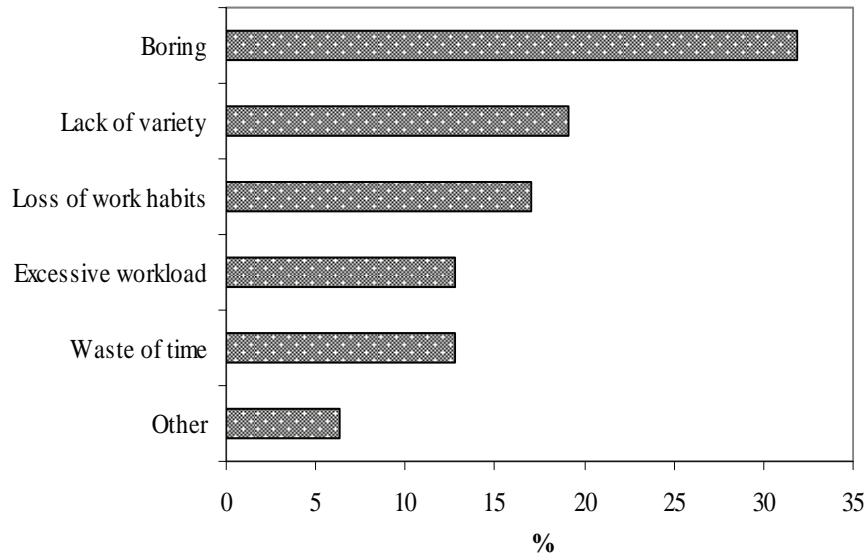
I expected a lot more things to go out and do, they brought us out twice the whole year. (Lang Street, quasi-compulsory TY, current TY, boys' school, working-class intake)

The most common reason for being dissatisfied with TY was that it was 'boring', cited by a third of those who expressed dissatisfaction in the student survey (Figure 2.8). A further fifth of students reported a lack of variety in the subjects and activities they were taking and 13 per cent felt the programme was a 'waste of time'. Contrasting views were evident on the workload involved in TY: 13 per cent of students thought the workload was excessive, mainly because of the number of projects required, while 17 per cent felt they were losing their work habits because of the lack of focus in the year.

As the survey analysis highlights, 'being bored' emerged as a source of student dissatisfaction (Wattle Street, TY optional, current TY, boys' school, mixed intake). Some students argue that there should be more work involved and feel that it will be difficult to make the transition into fifth year. One student described becoming 'brain dead' during TY (Belmore Street, TY optional, current TY, girls' school, mixed intake). Thus, concern about the transition into the Leaving Certificate programme was reported by a number of students:

It'll be hard to get into the swing of things next year. (Wattle Street, TY compulsory, current TY, boys' school, mixed intake)

It will definitely be a shock next year, because like you've to go back into the studying routine and all. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

**Figure 2.8: Reasons for dissatisfaction with Transition Year**

Some students felt that TY was a waste of time and argued that it does not suit students who were keen to finish school as soon as possible.

*Interviewer:* You were saying that you wouldn't have taken it if you'd the choice. Why, do you think?

I just think it's a waste of a year, you could be finished a year early.

For people that don't really like school, they should have a choice because if they want to get out of school quicker then ... they don't really want to have a doss year in between, they just want to get out quicker. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Some students complained about the demands of project work and the stress associated with this. However, these complaints seemed to be tied in with the self-directed approach of TY and the increased time management skills demanded of the students, with the lack of immediate deadlines seen as sometimes leading to a loss in motivation.

It's a different type of stress, it's not like the Junior Cert.

*Interviewer:* What way is it stressful?

Projects.

Projects.

...

We get loads of time really.

Sometimes it can be short.

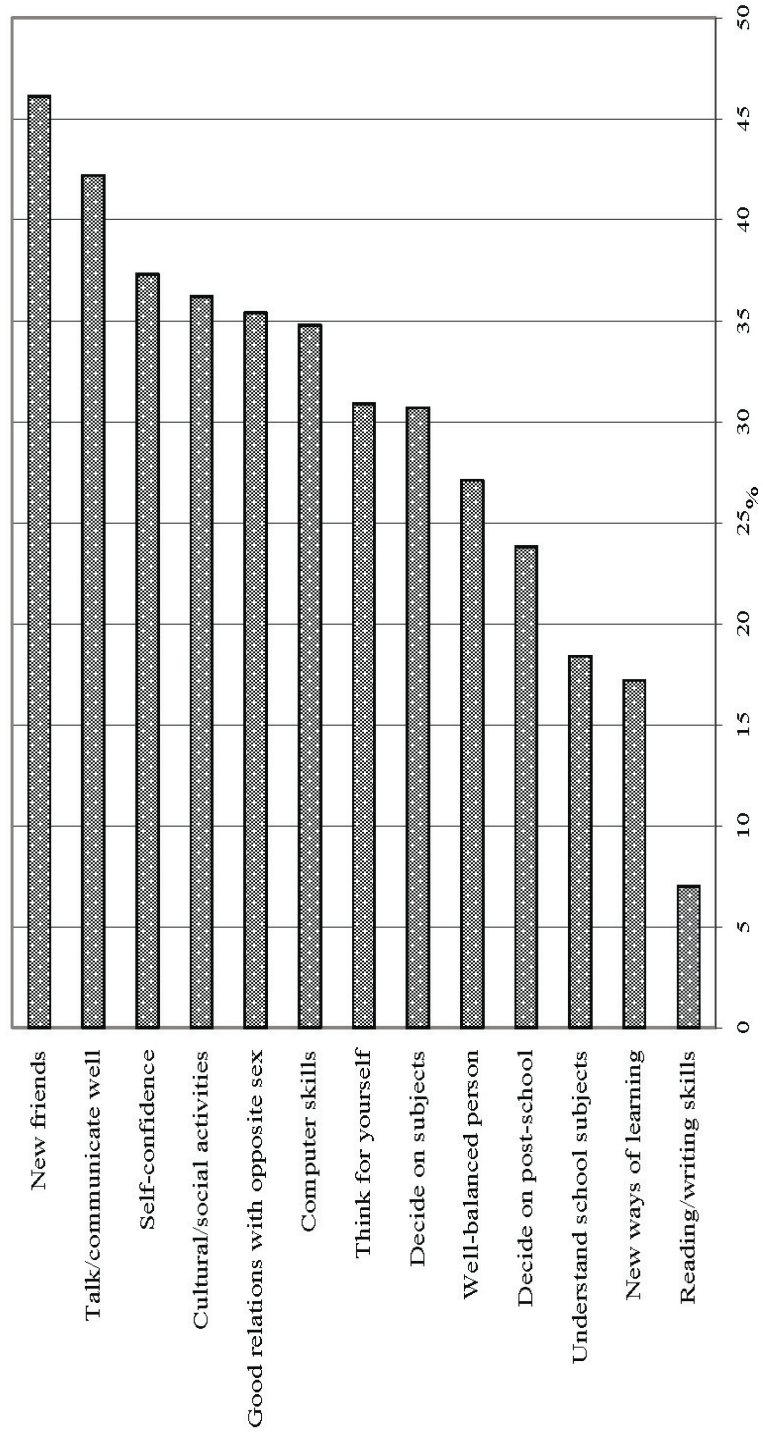
You always leave it 'til the last minute. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Students in schools where TY was compulsory were somewhat more critical of the programme than those in schools with optional TY. It would seem that the very act of choosing to take TY gave students a sense of investment in the success of the programme. In contrast, making TY compulsory meant that the cohort was made up of students with different levels of interest in the programme in particular and in school in general.

## **2.8 Perceptions after Transition Year**

It might be expected that students' views on TY could alter when they had completed the programme and had a chance to reflect on it. Students in fifth year who had taken TY were asked to rate the benefits of the programme along a number of dimensions. With the exception of developing reading and writing skills, the majority of students felt that TY had been at least of some benefit in relation to these skills and competencies. Figure 2.9 shows the proportion of students who indicated the programme had benefited them 'a lot'. The programme was seen as having the most benefit in relation to aspects of personal and social development, including making new friends, being able to talk and communicate well with others, taking part in cultural and social activities, and building good relations with friends of the opposite sex. Over a third of students felt that TY had been 'a lot' of benefit in relation to computer skills, with just under a third reporting its benefit in relation to thinking for yourself and deciding on which subjects to take in fifth year. Fewer than a quarter of students reported that TY had been a lot of benefit in deciding

Figure 2.9: Perceived benefits of Transition Year (per cent reporting 'a lot')



what to do after leaving school, although two-thirds felt it had been at least of some benefit in this respect. Less than a fifth felt it had been highly beneficial in helping them to understand their school subjects or in finding new ways of learning. A scale was constructed summing student responses across all of the specified measures.<sup>4</sup> Those in schools with optional TY reported more benefits from taking the programme than those in schools with compulsory programmes (with a score of 2.2 compared with 1.9). Furthermore, female students reported more benefits than male students. However, perceived benefits did not vary significantly by the grades received at Junior Certificate level.

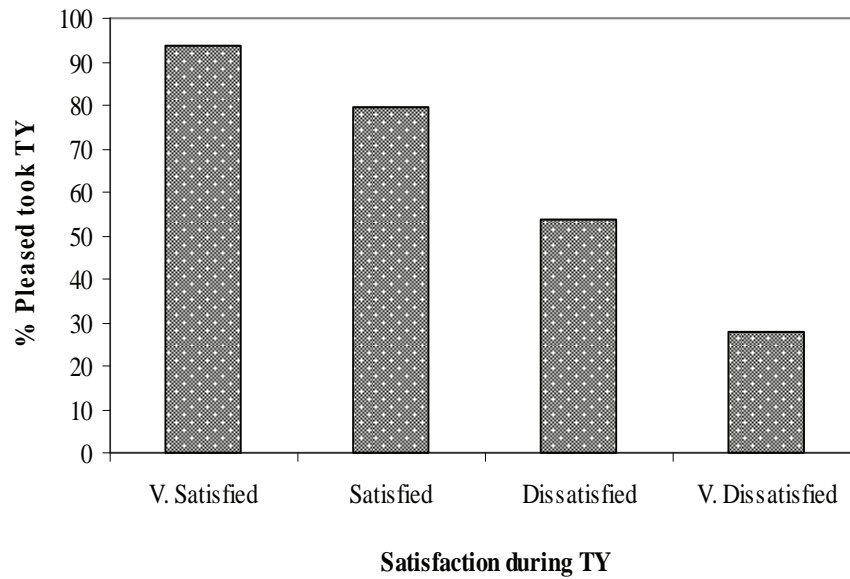
Overall, over three-quarters (77 per cent) of students reported that they were pleased that they had taken TY. As might be expected, those who regretted taking the programme reported fewer benefits from taking TY. Students in schools where TY was optional were much more likely to report being pleased to have taken the programme (91 per cent compared with 63 per cent in schools with compulsory TY). There was no variation by gender in reported satisfaction. There was little variation by social class background, but those from semi/unskilled manual backgrounds tended to have somewhat lower satisfaction levels. Older students tended to have lower satisfaction levels than their younger counterparts (73 per cent compared with 82 per cent). Those who had received higher grades at Junior Certificate level are more likely to report they were pleased they had taken the programme (grades were 7.9 among this group compared with 7.2 among other students); this grade difference was more marked in schools with compulsory TY.

As might be expected, there was a significant relationship between perceived satisfaction with TY during the programme and students' retrospective evaluations of the programme (Figure 2.10). The vast majority of students who had been very satisfied with TY reported, in fifth year, that they were pleased that they had taken the programme. However, there was some shift in perspective between the two time-points; a fifth of those who had been satisfied with the programme were not pleased they had taken it while over half of those who had been dissatisfied were pleased they had taken TY in retrospect.

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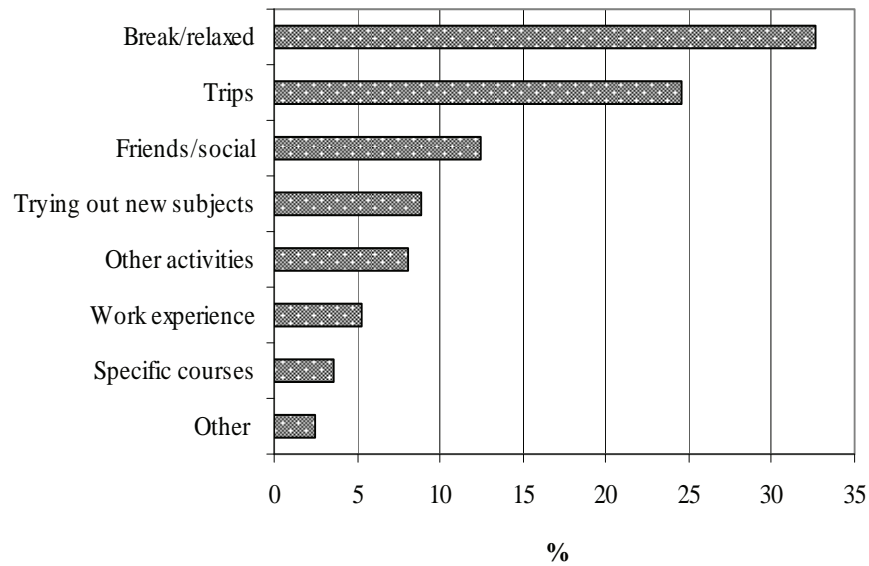
<sup>4</sup> The scale was highly reliable with an alpha value of 0.88.

**Figure 2.10: Retrospective evaluation of TY by satisfaction during programme**

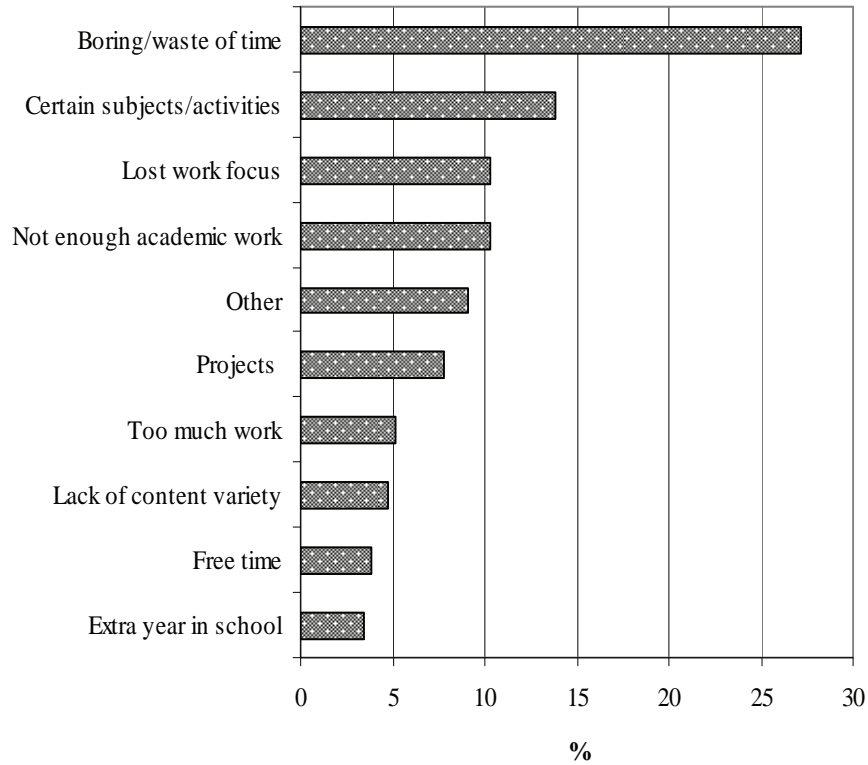


Students were asked what they most liked about TY in retrospect. The most frequent response, mentioned by a third of students, was that TY represented a break from study and was seen as relaxing (Figure 2.11). Sometimes this was framed positively in terms of having more ‘freedom’ and ‘less stress’; however, some students framed this negatively in terms of ‘doing nothing’ or being able to ‘doss’. A quarter of students described school trips as the most positive part of the programme with 8 per cent mentioning other activities (such as fashion shows or concerts). The social aspects, particularly the chance to make new friends, and the opportunity to try out different subjects and develop different skills were also seen as positive aspects.



**Figure 2.11: Most liked about Transition Year**

Students were also asked what they liked least about TY. The most frequent response, given by over a quarter of students, was that TY was 'boring' and a 'waste of time' (Figure 2.12). Allied to this was a group of students who criticised the amount of free time or free classes that they had during TY. A tenth of students felt that there had not been enough focus on academic work and, as a result, a further tenth reported difficulties in making the transition to fifth year, having lost their focus on work during TY. Other factors cited by students included project work, having too much work to do, a lack of variety in the content of the programme in their school, and having to spend an extra year in school.

**Figure 2.12: Least liked about Transition Year**

During the focus group interviews, fifth year students were again asked to reflect on their TY experiences. Many students described it as ‘brilliant’ and ‘fun’ and were positive about all of the activities and trips they were involved in. These new experiences often sparked students’ interest and were seen as contributing to their own personal development.

It was a brilliant year, we did a musical and went on a school trip to Amsterdam and we went to France, it was a really good year, it’s very good at building up your confidence and stuff because you’re doing things in Transition Year that you wouldn’t do in other years.  
(Belmore Street, TY optional, ex-TY, girls’ school, mixed intake)

Some students were positive about the chance to reflect on their future career, as well as develop personally. TY thus provided a bridge between the Junior and Leaving Certificate.

*Interviewer:* What do you feel you got out of doing TY?

My communication skills and my direction in life, I've kind of narrowed down where I'm going and like last year I didn't have a clue but now I know where I'm going in life and what I have to do when I leave, after Leaving Cert. (Lang Street, TY quasi-compulsory, ex-TY, boys' school, working-class intake)

However, it was pointed out that this was sometimes at the expense of academic progress.

Well I think it was a very good year, I got the most out of it like and as well it was the kind of social aspect but like ... I clearly didn't do better in Maths and stuff because I moved down a class and stuff, like I didn't do well in the academic point of view, I did well in all the other stuff, I have a lot more skills and stuff. (Harris Street, TY compulsory, ex-TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Students reported feeling more mature entering fifth year and some felt that there was a significant difference between their cohort and those who had come directly from third year into the senior cycle.

Loads of people have said they could pick out ... like the third years that came into fifth year rather than the fourth years because the fourth years are more like they know how to respond and act in class. (Barrack Street, TY optional, ex-TY, girls' school, working-class intake)

While many thought that the trips and activities were good fun, TY was sometimes described as 'boring' and some claimed that there were long periods of inactivity and 'doing nothing'.

Well, some parts of it was just boring because well the trips were real good but there was big gaps where we didn't do anything for ages and that was a bit boring, but apart from that it was good. (Fig Lane, TY optional, ex-TY, coed school, middle-class intake)

There could have been loads more, but there couldn't have been a lot less. (Lang Street, quasi-compulsory TY, ex-TY, boys' school, working-class intake)

Some students found it very hard to settle into fifth year and get back into the routine of studying, especially when it involved undertaking new subjects.

Well last year I was in Transition Year so it's very different to come in from fifth year and to do all the subjects that we didn't really do last year, you know. (Belmore Street, TY optional, ex-TY, girls' school, mixed intake)

Some specifically reported becoming 'lazy' during their fourth year, and thus found the transition to the demands of the Leaving Certificate curriculum difficult.

It makes you lazy, I think, because we didn't do anything. It was kind of come into fifth year, for a whole year you were used to not really doing homework or anything so you got lazy. (Barrack Street, TY optional, ex-TY, girls' school, working-class intake)

However, while some students did initially find the extra demands on their time problematic, they soon adjusted to their new routine.

I thought it would be worse though like because people give out about the whole going into fifth year after Transition Year, it wasn't that bad now once you get it into your head but it is hard, it's not as much fun. (Belmore Street, TY optional, ex-TY, girls' school, mixed intake)

As depicted in Figure 2.10, some students now in their fifth year expressed some regret about having taken TY. They felt that they would have preferred to be nearer to completing their school education.

Because if I hadn't done TY I would be doing my Leaving Cert and then I'll be over with school. So now I'd be finished. (Barrack Street, TY optional, ex-TY, girls' school, working-class intake)

## **2.9 Conclusions**

This chapter has explored the experiences of students before and after taking the Transition Year programme. The case-study schools vary in whether they provide Transition Year and, if they do so, whether it is on a compulsory or optional basis. The interaction between school provision

and student choice means that the profile of students taking Transition Year is quite different from the profile of those going directly into a Leaving Certificate programme. Transition Year participants are more likely than non-participants to be younger, better behaved, have achieved higher grades, and have higher educational aspirations. In general, therefore, it tends to be students who are already highly engaged in school that are exposed to the programme.

Transition Year and fifth year students differ not just in their profile but also in their learning experiences. TY students are more likely to engage in activity-based learning within class, with a greater use of project work and group work, more frequent use of computer and audio/video facilities, and a greater chance to have a say in what happens in class. In contrast, learning in fifth year classes tends to be more teacher-dominated and homework-based. TY students were also given the opportunity to try a wider range of subjects and activities than fifth year students, although the breadth of the programme varied across the case-study schools. Work experience was a core element of the Transition Year programme in all of the schools. However, students varied somewhat in the extent to which they used the placement to inform their choice of later career.

Students were generally positive about their experiences of Transition Year, both during the year and after they had entered fifth year. Over four-fifths expressed satisfaction during TY while over three-quarters were happy they had taken the programme in retrospect. Positive features of the programme were seen to include the chance to try out new subjects and activities, and the opportunity to take a break from study after the demands of the Junior Certificate exam. Students also emphasised the benefits of taking Transition Year for their own personal development, feeling they had matured in the course of the year and become more self-confident.

There was, however, a group of students who was less positive about the Transition Year experience, a group that was somewhat more prevalent in schools where the programme was compulsory. This is in keeping with previous research which showed that students who actively choose to take TY derive more benefit from the programme (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). There was also some variation in perceptions across dif-

ferent groups of students, with those groups who were under-represented in TY, namely, older, working-class and lower-performing students, being somewhat more critical of the programme when they did actually take it. Their criticisms of the year centred on it being 'boring' and 'a waste of time', with some commenting on the lack of variety in the programme and the excessive workload involved in projects.

Many students felt that taking part in TY had led to a loss of work habits, finding it more difficult to adjust to the study demands of the Leaving Certificate programme on entering fifth year. For the most part, these difficulties were seen as temporary. The extent to which taking Transition Year is associated with actual changes in student attitudes to school and schoolwork will be explored in Chapter Six.

## *Chapter Three*

# **ENTRY TO LEAVING CERTIFICATE PROGRAMMES**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines student pathways into the different Leaving Certificate programmes. It explores the provision of these programmes across the case-study schools and the profile of students taking the different routes. It explores choice processes among students and the role of guidance in assisting student choice. Finally, the chapter explores differences between the Leaving Certificate programmes in student experiences and perceptions. As already outlined in Chapter One, there are three different Leaving Certificate programmes available: the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA). The LCVP was introduced in the mid-1990s with a strong vocational emphasis, through the curricular requirement of a specific combination of Leaving Certificate subjects, as well as link modules: additional courses geared towards preparation for the labour market. Depending on student performance, these modules are allocated between 30 and 70 points in the CAO higher education entry process. Because LCVP students differ from their LCE peers only in taking the link modules, there is considerable overlap in the profile and experiences of the two groups (see Smyth et al., 2007). In contrast, the LCA, also introduced in the mid-1990s, is a stand-alone programme. It consists of four half-year 'blocks' made up of a mixture of elective and compulsory modules ranging from 'Mathematical Applications' and 'Engineering' to 'Hair and Beauty' and 'Hotel, Catering and Tourism'. A key feature of

the LCA is continuous assessment, although there are a number of examinations at the end of the two year course (for a full discussion of the different Leaving Certificate programmes, see Smyth et al., 2007, and Chapter One).

### 3.2 Provision of the Programmes in the Case-study schools

Three of the case-study schools provide the full range of programmes at senior cycle: the LCE programme, LCVP and LCA (Table 3.1). Hay Street provides LCVP only, while Barrack Street and Harris Street are the only two schools to offer LCE only. LCA is always offered in conjunction with at least one other Leaving Certificate programme. Smaller schools were less likely to provide all three Leaving Certificate programmes, although there was no straightforward relationship between school size and range. Neither of the two middle-class schools provided the LCA programme.

**Table 3.1: Provision of Leaving Certificate programmes across the case-study schools**

School Name	Programmes Offered			School size	Student intake
	LCE	LCVP	LCA		
Dawson Street	√	√	√	Medium	Mixed
Belmore Street	√	√	√	Large	Mixed
Argyle Street	√	√	√	Large	Mixed
Park Street	√	√		Large	Mixed
Fig Lane	√	√		Large	Middle-class
Dawes Point	√	√		Small	Working-class
Wattle Street	√	√		Small	Mixed
Lang Street	√		√	Small	Working-class
Dixon Street	√		√	Large	Working-class
Barrack Street	√			Small	Working-class
Harris Street	√			Large	Middle-class
Hay Street		√		Small	Working-class



However, not all of the working-class schools provided the programme either. It appears that school policy plays a stronger role than school characteristics in shaping programme provision.

In the interviews with key personnel, the rationale for providing or not providing particular programmes was discussed in greater detail (see also Smyth et al., 2007). The motivation for introducing the LCVP programme centred on the opportunity to provide students with a wider range of skills than was available in the traditional curriculum along with giving them an exposure to more diverse teaching methods.

I think it was pretty much what it offered the students, you know, the opportunity to look at careers, the guidance module in it, and the IT module in it, you know. Students weren't getting a lot of that at senior cycle level, and we felt that you know, and in putting it to the parents, they felt that certainly the students would benefit from it. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

School staff in other schools did not offer strong reasons for not providing the LCVP programme, often citing lack of detailed awareness of it. However, school size was seen in one case as a potential constraint:

I think the size of the school ... if you have too many programmes for a small number of students, I'm not sure that the school could cope very well with it. (Dixon Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

Five of the case-study schools provided the LCA programme. The introduction of the programme into the school was motivated by a desire to provide a route to achievement for students who had difficulties coping with the existing curriculum as well as a desire to promote student retention.

I suppose the main objective has been to get the less able students out of the academic-driven programme of Leaving Cert, and enhance their learning then via a more hands-on approach and a more appropriate form of subject and delivery even. And expose them to a more proactive form of learning maybe. (Argyle Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

Fundamentally it gives students who are not high academic achievers an opportunity to gain good results by different mechanisms. As you know, it's continuous assessment based on task, based on modules

and a lot of students, it suits them rather than having a terminal exam. (Lang Street, staff, boys' school, working-class intake)

Staff in the seven schools not providing LCA emphasised the lack of demand for the programme among their student body or the difficulty in providing such a programme for a very small number of students.

It was going to be a huge investment. Now if you invested in it and you found that the children wouldn't do it because the parents wouldn't let them do it, then you were going nowhere with it, and I think you would need at least fifteen children. But it is a difficulty because we would have at least in every year group, I would imagine, five or six children for whom it would definitely be a plus. (Harris Street, staff, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Even in schools providing LCA, some groups of parents were seen as resistant to the idea of their children taking the programme:

Certainly I have to say our parent community ... does not regard LCA highly. And I had weak students who would benefit but their parents would say no, you're doing the Leaving. That's very common here. (Argyle Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

Another factor that emerged in the interviews related to the school's desire to avoid being labelled in a particular way in the context of competition between schools for students:

An awful lot of our students, I think it would be more manageable for them and I think ... it would make a lot more sense for them and have more practical application for them. However, there seems to be a view that if we were to introduce it, we would be seen as a sort of offering something less than other schools. Because we wouldn't have the same numbers as in other schools doing Leaving Cert and if we were to go the route of the LCA, then it I think the fear is by some teaching staff that we would be seen as a special school just offering LCA. (Hay Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

### **3.3 Student Characteristics and Programme Entry**

Among the cohort of all students entering fifth year (either directly or having taken Transition Year), the majority (69 per cent) went into the

LCE programme, a quarter went into LCVP while 6 per cent took the LCA programme. Students who had taken Transition Year were much more likely to go on to LCE (81 per cent compared with 54 per cent) and much less likely to take LCVP; none of the cohort who had taken Transition Year went on to take LCA subsequently.

Table 3.2 shows a model which indicates the characteristics of the students entering the different Leaving Certificate programmes in fifth year. A multilevel model is used to take account of the fact that students in the same school will have similar experiences. The model is referred to as a 'multinomial logistic regression model' because the outcome of concern, programme entry, is categorical. In the model, LCA and LCVP entrants are contrasted with the larger group taking the LCE programme.

Very strong differences are evident between LCA entrants and those taking LCE in terms of their social profile and prior experiences of school. Model 1 shows that students from professional or farming backgrounds are significantly less likely to enter LCA compared with those from other social groups. LCA entrants tend to be older on average and had lower reading scores on entry to post-primary school. LCA entrants are more likely to have been in a middle or lower stream class. However, this effect is no longer significant when receipt of learning support is taken into account (Model 2). Those who received learning support in third year are 5.5 times more likely to enter LCA than other students. LCA entrants also have somewhat higher misbehaviour rates than their LCE counterparts and are less likely to aspire to taking a degree in the longer term. LCA entrants have significantly lower Junior Certificate grades than their LCE counterparts, with an achievement gap of almost one grade point per subject. While there are clear differences between LCA entrants and LCE entrants, there are no significant differences between those taking LCVP and those taking LCE. In other words, there is considerable overlap between LCE and LCVP entrants in terms of social background, prior experiences of school and prior achievement levels. The school-level variance terms indicate that there is significant variation across the case-study schools in the take-up of LCA and LCVP, and that this variation is not fully explained by prior student characteristics.

**Table 3.2: Entry to Leaving Certificate programmes - multilevel multinomial logistic regression model (LCA and LCVP entry versus LCE)**

	LCA			LCVP		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	-2.788	-4.117	-3.385	-0.283	-0.039	-0.001
Female	-0.673	0.085	0.143	0.020	0.019	0.038
Social class:						
Higher professional	-1.546*	-0.538	0.096	-0.394	-0.371	-0.302
Lower prof./farmer	-1.825*	-1.186	-0.875	-0.423	-0.401	-0.360
Non-manual	-0.759	-0.896	-0.315	-0.341	-0.341	-0.294
Skilled manual	-0.395	-0.325	-0.216	-0.416	-0.365	-0.334
Non-employed	0.526	0.170	-0.831	-0.227	-0.259	-0.127
(Base: semi/unskilled manual)						
Age (centred on mean)	0.988**	0.288	0.359	-0.246	-0.300	-0.317
Reading score on school entry	-0.084**	-0.045	-0.014	0.002	-0.001	0.003
Class allocation in third year:						
Higher stream		-0.696	-1.066		0.035	0.048
Middle stream		0.169	-0.607		-0.494	-0.574
Lower stream		1.192	0.341		-0.177	-0.277
(Base: Mixed ability)						

Misbehaviour in third year		0.473 <sup>-</sup>	-0.268		-0.058	-0.118
Received learning support in third year		1.703 <sup>***</sup>	1.202 <sup>***</sup>		0.008	0.020
Degree-level educational aspirations in third year (Base: lower aspirations)		-1.202 <sup>*</sup>	-0.484		-0.068	-0.008
Junior Certificate Grade Point Average			-0.926 <sup>***</sup>			-0.088
School-level variance	1.961 <sup>*</sup>	2.077 <sup>*</sup>	2.418 <sup>*</sup>	2.326 <sup>*</sup>	2.281 <sup>*</sup>	2.268 <sup>*</sup>

Note: <sup>\*\*\*</sup> p<0.001, <sup>\*\*</sup> p<0.01, <sup>\*</sup> p<0.05, <sup>-</sup> p<0.10.

### **3.4 Choice Processes**

The previous section explored the characteristics of students taking the three Leaving Certificate programmes. However, these patterns may reflect the result of school policy and/or student choice. This section explores the processes influencing student choice of programme, where such a choice was available to them.

In three of the case-study schools, namely, Barrack Street, Harris Street and Hay Street, students did not have a choice of Leaving Certificate programmes as only one programme was provided. Some of the students in these schools felt, at least in theory, that they would like a choice of programme but few knew much about the alternatives available. One girl in Harris Street felt that the LCA would be more suitable for her as 'I am not the brightest student' (girls' school, middle-class intake). In the remainder of the schools, students were asked about the relative importance of different people in helping to decide on the programme they took. As in the junior cycle, parents emerge as the most important source of advice and support in choosing a programme (Figure 3.1). Another informal source, friends, is cited by around half of students as important. Subject teachers also emerge as an important source of help for around half of students. The guidance counsellor is seen as important by four in ten students while a quarter cite their class tutor or year head as important.

Students who took LCA in fifth year were more likely than those in LCE/LCVP to cite a number of formal and informal sources as being important sources of advice. Some variation was also evident across the case-study schools in the importance of different school staff, but these patterns appear to reflect organisation and climate in individual schools rather than the social mix of the school or other objective characteristics. There was no variation between schools in the perceived importance of parents, with parents the most important source of advice across all schools.

Although students in these schools appeared to have a choice of programmes, over a fifth actually reported that they had been given no choice. Perceived lack of choice was more evident in two of the boys' schools, Park Street and Wattle Street, than in other schools, even though both schools provided LCE and LCVP. This may reflect the fact that

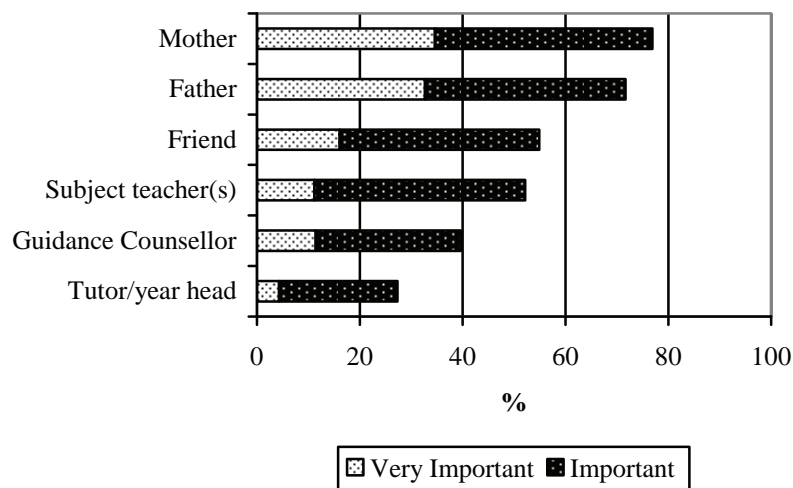
many students tended not to see LCVP as a distinct ‘programme’ (see Smyth et al., 2007). For example, the focus group interviews revealed that some students reported a lack of awareness of the correct subject choices for the LCVP.

But it’s like we were going to take it [LCVP] anyway, we put our names down for it like you know except we didn’t have the right subjects. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Yeah, I wanted to do LCVP at the time but I didn’t have the right subjects. (Park Street, LCE, boys’ school, mixed intake)

Well I knew I was just going to do the normal Leaving Cert but LCVP, they didn’t give us enough information on that at all, you have to have certain subjects picked which is kind of unfair really because people weren’t doing certain subjects, then they can’t do LCVP if they weren’t the right ones. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

**Figure 3.1: Relative importance of sources of advice in programme choice (schools with choice only)**



Reflecting the survey findings, during the focus groups students reported a wide variety of sources of information and influence in terms of their senior cycle programme choices: parents, friends, teachers, guidance

counsellors and older students. However, some students also felt that the decision was theirs alone: 'it was up to us anyway' (Hay Street, LCVP, coed school, working-class intake). For some, it was a question of peer group influences:

Just felt I don't know, like none of our friends were doing LCA anyway, different groups like. (Argyle Street, current LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

The extent of family involvement differed. Some students clearly relied on tradition within the family in terms of older siblings' experiences, which could be both negative and positive: 'Because my brother did it [LCVP] and he told me to do it' (Fig Lane, LCVP, coed school, middle-class intake). In some cases, family members actively discouraged students from taking LCA because they felt they would be 'able for' the LCE programme.

*Interviewer:* Was anybody else involved, like outside the school, in giving you advice as to what programme to choose?

Parents.

*Interviewer:* What kind of things did the parents say?

They didn't want me to do the LCA.

Yeah, the same with me, they didn't want me to either.

*Interviewer:* And why did they not want you to do it?

I don't know, just didn't want me to do it.

My brother done it and they let him do it because they didn't know what it was, then he didn't think it was any good and they wouldn't let me do it. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

*Interviewer:* And why did you decide not to take LCA?

Because like everyone was pressure, they were saying I could do better and stuff like this, I don't know, I regret not doing it.

*Interviewer:* And is it because of what your friends said?



No, my dad told me I could choose which one I could do and I applied for LCA and then he was like I'd prefer you to do the other one actually but I didn't want to. I would have preferred to have done LCA, because I applied for it and all like but I know I'm not good at school at all ... I would much prefer to have done it. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

The focus group interviews provided a chance to hear the general reasons why students opted for and against particular programmes. Some students felt that LCE was the most advantageous programme in terms of post-school pathways, conferring greater benefits in terms of choice and future career options:

*Interviewer:* Why did you choose the normal Leaving Certificate?

Because you can go to college, university and do a wider range of courses. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Yeah, so I'm saying like if you want to make a go at a good career like or go to college or something, you're better off doing the ordinary Leaving Cert. (Dawes Point, LCE, boys' school, working-class intake)

In terms of the reasons for taking LCVP, many students cited being attracted by the extra points offered by this programme, which provided them with a 'cushion to fall back on' (Belmore Street, LCVP, girls' school, mixed intake).

*Interviewer:* So why did you choose LCVP?

I heard it was easy for the points.

Like you get 70 points, 70 extra points it is added on, an extra subject, it's counted as an extra subject. (Park Street, LCVP, boys' school, mixed intake)

In addition, a number of students highlighted the work experience offered as part of LCVP. The LCA programme was reported by students as appealing in terms of being more practically based and orientated towards the labour market: 'I wanted to get a trade' (Argyle Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake). Again, work experience was cited as being a

main draw for the programme (see also Banks et al., 2010). Some students also felt that it was easier in terms of schoolwork demands and a small number reported changing to the LCA programme after finding the LCE too difficult:

About two weeks after the term started I couldn't cope with the pressure in the ordinary fifth year so my mother and I got to talk to [the principal] and she agreed that it was best for me to do the Leaving Cert Applied this year. (Belmore Street, LCA, girls' school, mixed intake)

In terms of reasons for not choosing a certain programme, some students were very pragmatic, basing the decision around the amount of free time. The LCE was seen as preferable to the LCVP on the grounds that it is 'an extra class off to have a longer lunch' (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake).

*Interviewer:* Why did you choose to do fifth year without the LCA or the LCVP?

You get more time off without LCVP.

It's three classes.

*Interviewer:* Three extra classes?

You finish earlier [if you don't do LCVP]. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

However, others rejected the LCVP programme, claiming that the time would be better spent on other more beneficial activities.

I'd rather not do [LCVP].

It's pointless.

A lot of work.

*Interviewer:* Why is that?

Because it's actually work, it's maybe waste of another class as well.

Yeah, by next year you could be having say a study period or something that you could do other work in.

Or have an extra class in something that you're finding hard.

And a lot of computers, I don't like computers so I don't really want to do that. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

While the points available for the link modules were seen as attractive, some students prioritised meeting university requirements and their own career ambitions.

You get the points but it's not a subject that any college are looking for you to have so nobody wants to base their subject around just to do that when it's not going to get you into any college. (Fig Lane, LCE, coed school, middle-class intake)

Students cited a number of reasons for not choosing the LCA programme. There was some confusion even among LCA students about their options after the programme.

They were saying with the straight Leaving you could go and get into better courses but if you really liked LCA ... you get experience and all different things so I just chose LCA.

Yeah but you can get into college with LCA as well.

You do a test or something for it.

PLC course, is it? (Dixon Street, current LCA, coed school, working-class intake)

Some students were aware that taking LCA could potentially limit their post-school careers:

*Interviewer:* Why did you not choose the LCA?

Don't have as many options.

You have more options if you do the normal Leaving Cert I think. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Others felt that the LCA programme had the label of being an easy year and had an associated stigma as being for the less academically able, with the view that some people 'only want to do it for the doss' (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake).

So I'd say a lot of people didn't go in there because they thought they'd get a label or their friends would mock them or something like that which is stupid. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

However, some students reported being annoyed that they were unable to undertake the LCA programme, as in their school it was an option for only a limited number of students in the 'lower ability' category.

*Interviewer:* In terms of your programmes here in school, did you have any choice about what programme to take this year?

I don't know, they were all built like, we had to do what they'd picked.

Yeah, me and you wanted to do LCA, didn't we?

Yeah.

And we were told that we couldn't do it, why we weren't allowed.

They wouldn't leave us.

Yeah.

...

They only let all the slow class.

Yeah.

All the dunces.

Yeah.

*Interviewer:* So basically you would have wanted to do LCA?

Yeah but we weren't allowed.

*Interviewer:* So how did you feel about that?

Annoyed.

Annoyed really, yeah, they weren't allowing us do something that we wanted to do like. (Lang Street, TY, boys' school, working-class intake)

In sum, students were motivated by a combination of factors, including their plans for the future and the perceived difficulty of other programmes. However, the issue of 'choice' is complex because some students reported a lack of say in the programme they entered.

### **3.5 Guidance Provision and Programme Entry**

Forty per cent of the students reported that the guidance counsellor was important in influencing their choice of programme. The case-study schools were found to vary in terms of the provision of career guidance, regarding frequency, intensity, content and mechanisms of delivery, and the extent of parental involvement in senior cycle programme choices. Guidance provision relating specifically to subject choice will be considered further in Chapter Four. Based on the interviews with key personnel and focus groups with students, Table 3.3 provides a summary of guidance provision across the case-study schools. In some schools, programme advice and subject advice are combined while in other schools with more restricted programme options, student choice is restricted to subjects only. Dawes Point and Wattle Street are exceptions in that students are offered particular advice as regards the LCVP; they take the programme as an extra subject so the additional time commitment is stressed. Other schools opt to let an LCVP group emerge, based on the correct subject combinations; in these schools, students are not always aware of these combinations before starting fifth year. Almost all of the schools hold information meetings for parents regarding programme and/or subject choice; the exception is Dixon Street, a working-class school, which formerly had held an information session for parents but experienced poor turnout and subsequently discontinued this practice. As the table illustrates, most students received a mixture of classes and one-to-one sessions, which varied from compulsory appointments to voluntary meetings scheduled at the individual student's request.

**Table 3.3: Guidance Provision by School**

School Name	Type of Provision
Argyle Street	<p>In third year, the Guidance Counsellor (GC) gives students an information session during class time on the programme options: TY/LCA/LCE. The TY coordinator also talks to class groups about TY.</p> <p>The GC gives classes a separate briefing re subject options. Those who take TY have weekly guidance classes which cover subject choice among other topics.</p> <p>An information night for parents covers programme and subject options.</p>
Barrack Street	<p>Third year students are given one or two group sessions with the GC to cover choosing TY and subject options.</p> <p>An information meeting with parents covers TY and subject choices.</p>
Belmore Street	<p>Third years are given a presentation on TY, LCA, LCE and LCVP.</p> <p>Students going into fifth year have an individual meeting with the GC and do a DAT [Differential Aptitude Test] assessment to help their choice. For those going into TY, the individual meeting takes place during TY.</p> <p>An information night for parents covers programme and subject options; students may also attend this session</p>
Dawes Point	<p>In third year, the GC holds information sessions for students regarding choosing the LCE or LCVP and about subject choice. Students also take aptitude tests to guide their choice.</p> <p>Parents are given a leaflet regarding choices and sign off on these; this is followed by an information meeting for parents</p>

Dawson Street	<p>Third year students have an information day with the GC where programme and subject options are discussed. Prior to this, students have taken the DAT and interest tests to guide their choices. The information meeting for parents covers programme and subject options</p>
Dixon Street	<p>The GC holds individual meetings with third year students to discuss their DAT test results and their programme and subject options. Class meetings are also held with the students. Information letters are sent home to parents and parents sign off on the programme choices. There is no information meeting for parents, as it was discontinued because of poor attendance</p>
Fig Lane	<p>The TY co-ordinator holds a general meeting for students regarding the programme and an information meeting for parents. The LCVP option is allowed to emerge based on subject combinations. There is a general meeting with third years regarding subject options. Students do a DAT [Differential Aptitude Test] assessment and those going into fifth year have an individual meeting with the GC. For those going into TY, the individual meeting takes place during TY.</p>
Harris Street	<p>For third years, there is an information evening for parents and students about TY. Because TY is compulsory, subject choice is discussed in fourth year. It involves weekly guidance classes, DAT assessment tests, individual meetings with the GC and briefings by subject teachers. Parents are given a booklet regarding subject choice.</p>
Hay Street	<p>Students do not have a choice of programmes as all are taking LCVP. In third year, students have an individual meeting with the GC regarding subject choice and an information meeting is held for parents</p>

Lang Street	<p>TY is quasi-compulsory; an information evening about TY is given in third year to students and parents. Subject choice is addressed as part of the TY guidance module; parents are required to sign off on these choices</p>
Park Street	<p>In third year, the GC has a timetabled class with students about their programme and subject options. The LCVP coordinator also talks to students, stressing the importance of subject combinations.</p> <p>An information evening for parents covers the choice of LCE or LCVP and subject options.</p>
Wattle Street	<p>All students take TY and are required to choose their LC subjects before entering the programme. Subject choice is covered in a class meeting with the GC. The LCVP option is allowed to emerge based on subject combinations.</p> <p>An information evening for parents covers LCVP and subject choice.</p>



Some students felt quite well informed and knowledgeable about their programme options and the advantages and disadvantages of each one.

There was like a seminar for the parents last year and it was like two hours long, the guidance counsellor did it and it said what's involved in doing LCA or LCVP and normal stuff and all that so we went to it so we had a choice, yeah, filled out forms. (Belmore Street, LCVP, girls' school, mixed intake)

Well, I went in and I talked to the career guidance teacher here and she gave me a leaflet about LCA and she gave me a few weeks to decide whether or not I wanted to do it so I talked to my parents and I decided then to do LCA. (Belmore Street, LCA, girls' school, mixed intake)

However, as the key personnel interviews confirm, for others, the situation was somewhat different: 'we weren't really told like, we just got news on it in assembly, if you were eligible for it [LCVP]' (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake). One student claimed 'I'd say I didn't even know what LCVP stood for' (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake). Others, despite receiving advice, reported that it 'went in one ear and out the other' (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake).

*Interviewer:* And would you have liked to get more advice and information?

Yeah to know what they actually do, I kind of wish I had done it because I didn't know that.

You got work experience and go on trips.

Because you do loads, I'd have probably done it if I'd known what you do there. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students reported being confused as to the post-school options with regards to LCVP:

And then with the LVCP, no one knew ...

Yeah, whether to do it or not, we didn't know what it was about.

We thought it applied to only ITs.

It's real confusing.

Yeah.

The LCVP used to only be applicable in ITs ... but now they're accepting it in the universities and none of us knew that and it could have been 70 extra points, like if you got 500 points and you wanted to do medicine and you got the 70 for your LCVP, you had enough to do it. (Belmore Street, TY, girls' school, mixed intake)

### **3.6 Learning Experiences in Fifth Year**

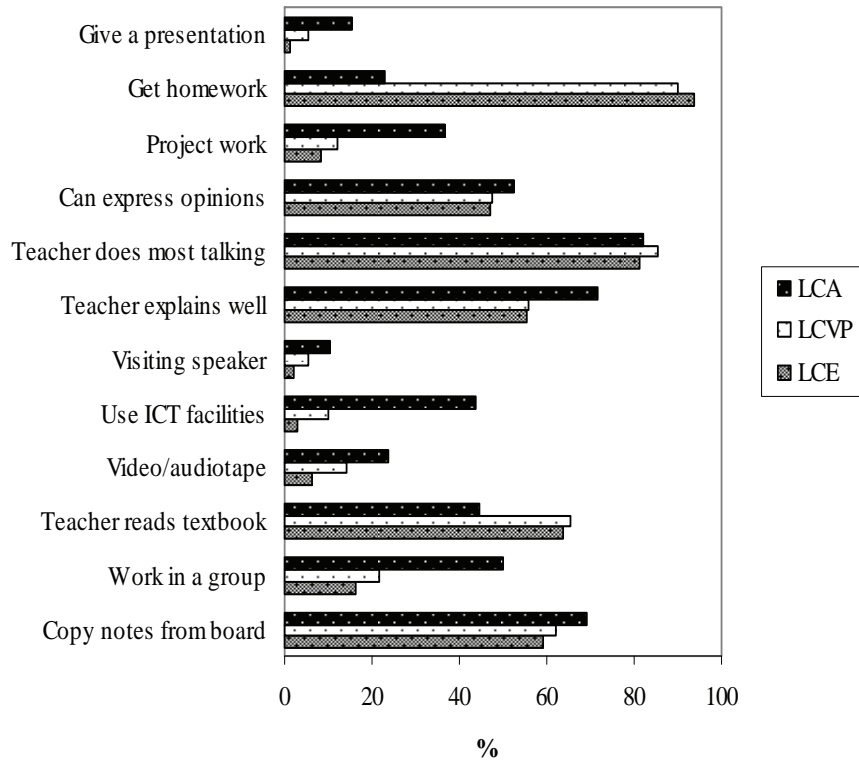
#### *3.6.1 Teaching Methods Used*

Fifth year students were asked about the different teaching methods used in their class on a day-to-day basis. Clear differences are evident between the LCA and LCE/LCVP groups. LCA students report more frequent use of active learning methods, including project work, group work, use of ICT facilities, use of video and audio equipment, giving presentations in class and having visiting speakers (Figures 3.2 and 3.3). In contrast, LCE and LCVP students report more frequent homework and the teacher reading from the textbook more frequently. There are few differences between LCE and LCVP students in their learning experiences, with the exception that LCVP students have more frequent usage of ICT facilities. In spite of marked differences between LCA and LCE/LCVP students, it is worth noting that the majority of all fifth year students, regardless of the programme they take, report that the teacher does most of the talking in their class. However, LCA students are more likely to report that the teacher explains things really well.

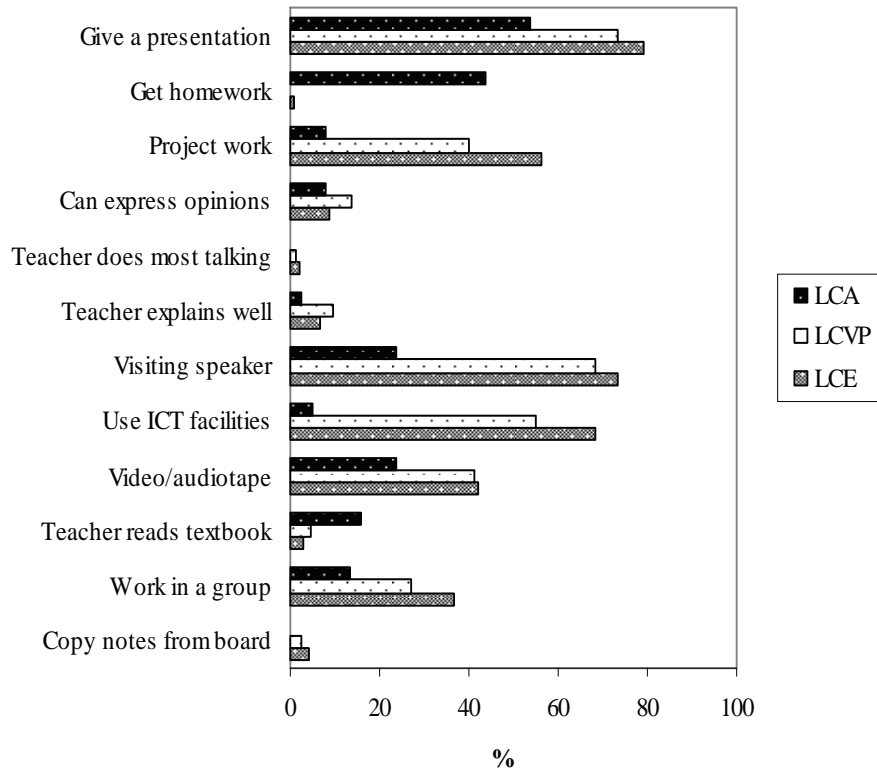
The figures indicate that receiving homework is a common feature of LCE and LCVP classes. This is confirmed by student reports of the amount of time spent on homework and study in fifth year. LCE students report spending an average of 101 minutes compared to 96 minutes for LCVP and a much lower level of 50 minutes for LCA students. LCE and LCVP students are also overrepresented among those spending longer hours on homework and study; almost one in two of these students spend

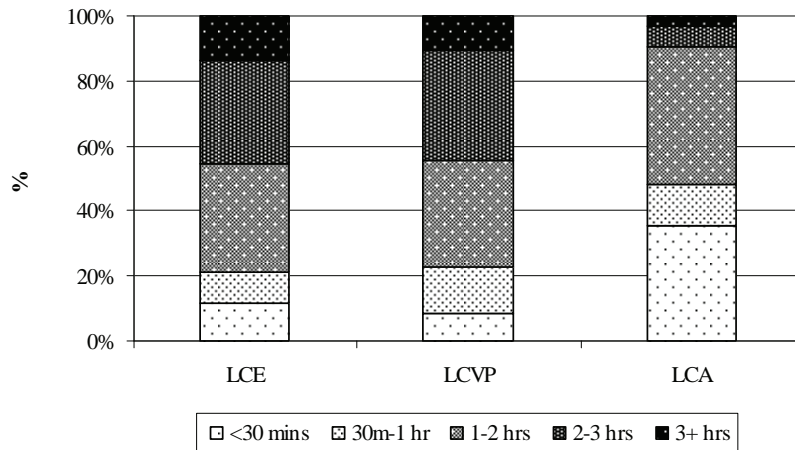
more than two hours per night compared with less than a tenth of LCA students (see Figure 3.4).

**Figure 3.2: Different teaching methods used in class (per cent ‘every lesson’/‘most lessons’)**



**Figure 3.3: Different teaching methods used in class (per cent 'never/hardly ever')**



**Figure 3.4: Time spent on homework in fifth year by programme**

Students were asked whether they had received extra help within school in fifth year. Just under a tenth of LCE students received such help while this was the case for one in six LCVP students. Not surprisingly, given their earlier take-up of learning support, LCA students were much more likely to report receiving extra help, with over a fifth doing so. In contrast, students did not vary significantly by programme in the extent to which they received help from their family; only 6 per cent were still receiving help on a frequent basis in fifth year while a further third received occasional help. Approximately one in six fifth year students were taking grinds or private tuition outside school; this was somewhat more common among LCE students (17 per cent) and least common among LCA students (5 per cent).

During the focus group interviews, students were asked in greater depth about their learning experiences during fifth year. For some, senior cycle was much the same in terms of teaching approaches as junior cycle. However, most students generally report a difference between fifth year and the previous year(s). In terms of teacher expectations, some students felt that there was actually a lower expectation this year as opposed to third year, with its focus on immediate preparation for the Junior Certificate:

I suppose they don't expect as much from you this year because they know there's no exam at the end of it. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

However, other students felt that fifth year brought new demands from teachers in terms of their commitment to schoolwork: 'They expect more of you like' (Hay Street, LCVP, coed school, working-class intake). Students were also expected to take more responsibility for their own learning: 'It's your Leaving Cert like so they kind of let you get on with it' (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake).

*Interviewer:* And what about the way your teachers teach you this year? Is it any different from last year? Is there a different approach?

They give you more responsibility, they don't like hand feed you stuff anymore, you have to do it yourself. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

A lot more responsibility on your part to do the work and if you don't want to, that's fine but it's your decision and it's your Leaving Cert. (Fig Lane, LCE, coed school, middle-class intake)

Some reported a greater freedom than previous years in terms of class discussions and debates.

It's more ... enjoyment and discussions about what we thought of the books instead of saying this is what we have to learn, write it down.

... Instead of just having one person's opinion telling you this is what happened you get to hear everyone else's and then come up with a better answer to the question at the end of the day like. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

However, others characterised this increased responsibility in terms of being more relaxed and 'laid back' than previous years. Some students reported finding this lack of strict structure problematic:

*Interviewer:* Is the approach to teaching any different in LCA?

Yeah.

*Interviewer:* In what way?

More laid back, you know, they don't really like, you don't have to, it's up to yourself. (Argyle Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake)

However, while some students reported more self-directed learning, others reported a persistent reliance on teacher-dominated classes, with the teacher 'just read[ing] out of the book' (Belmore Street, LCE).

But in English, our English teacher, she's got a schedule so she says have to do twelve pages a day and you're sitting there in the class and all she's doing is reading, she's not like explaining, and the book we are reading is just so boring. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

But then it's like some teachers we do have, they don't bother to do it either, give you notes or anything that, just read it out of a book and then leave you.

Yeah.

Yeah, just read it out of the book or leave you to read the chapter yourself.

And then do other parts of the course.

Especially in science because you don't know what's going on, you need it explained to you so it's not good. (Belmore Street, LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

Some ex-Transition Year students noticed that fifth year was more reliant on working individually than the group work they had undertaken while in fourth year:

*Interviewer:* And what about schoolwork, is that different this year?

Yeah.

Yeah because it's all individual, like last year [TY] it was mostly groups. (Fig Lane, LCE, coed school, middle-class intake)

However, as the survey analysis shows, some LCA students reported working in more varied ways than during the Junior Certificate, with 'project work and more task work' (Belmore Street, LCA) and 'we nor-

mally work as a group with the teacher' (Belmore Street, LCA, girls' school, mixed intake).

The LCA students valued the introduction of information technology as part of their normal daily routine.

*Interviewer:* And what do you like best about this year?

Most of our classes we're in the computer room for and I kind of like the computer room.

Yeah.

I kind of like the computer classes. (Belmore Street, LCA, girls' school, mixed intake)

Many students welcomed in particular the smaller class sizes in senior cycle, because of the increased attention that teachers were able to give to individual students.

But do you know what I find? I find the smaller the class the better it is, the more you understand.

Because my Maths class isn't that big, we've only got about fifteen people in it and I really get Maths like now, whereas in third year I didn't get them at all like.

There's more emphasis on you.

*Interviewer:* And why do you think the smaller class makes a difference?

Because they all listen.

There's less to control. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

*Interviewer:* Do you think the teachers take a different approach in class than you're used to this year?

... Yeah because it's a smaller class like.

It's a smaller class and they can listen to us what we have to say and all that.



And if we don't understand anything we get told like, not like last year you know, we wouldn't really get it explained properly. (Belmore Street, LCA, girls' school, mixed intake)

### 3.6.2 Work Experience

As well as differing in the teaching methods used, the three Leaving Certificate programmes differ in the work experience content. The vast majority (92 per cent) of those taking LCA reported having work experience placements; this was the case for the majority (80 per cent) of LCVP students but less than ten per cent of LCE students reported having any work experience. LCA students generally reported ten to fifteen days of work experience. Placements for LCVP students tended to be shorter, with the most frequent pattern being five days.

Most students saw a value in work experience and felt it was of real benefit to them in terms of their career decision-making.

I think now I know that is what I want to do after school. And people like they gave me a real insight ... I got to see at first hand. And I was let do some of the work as well. I thought it was really good like. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

I do LCVP so I got work experience, I thought it was of benefit, I went to something that I was interested in but I found out that it wasn't for me then, sort of waste of a year in college, might drop out. Now I know that I don't want to do that. (Argyle Street, LCVP, coed school, mixed intake)

In contrast, a group of LCE students felt that they had not been given enough information on work experience in order to make an informed choice of programme:

They didn't give you information on that, on LCVP, they didn't say that you were going to get work experience if you done it. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

In one of the schools, Dawson Street, fifth year students went on work experience placements, regardless of whether they were doing LCVP or not. A number of these students reported wanting to have more work experience as part of the LCE programme: 'Too short that was the only

thing about it'; 'One week wasn't really enough to learn all that you had to' (Dawson Street, LCE).

*Interviewer:* So what length would you think would be the best?

Another week.

Yeah, another week maybe.

You could try out something else.

Another week in another couple of weeks and then maybe a week before next Christmas as well so you could try a few things. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Some LCVP students also felt that not enough time was devoted to work experience as part of their programme.

*Interviewer:* And do you do work experience at all this year?

We are supposed to be doing it.

Three days.

Only for three days, yeah.

*Interviewer:* You get three days?

It should be longer like.

It should be a week anyway.

Because in three days if you do what you want to do and you only get three days to do it you are not going to learn a whole lot.

Not a hope.

If you had at least a week. (Hay Street, LCVP, coed school, working-class intake)

The timing was also important so that students were able to make informed decisions as to their subject choices.

*Interviewer:* Do you think everybody should do work experience?

Definitely, especially maybe at the start of fifth year, when you can change your options because if I had known beforehand I would have kept on different subjects. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students who did not take Transition Year expressed some regret as they did not have the opportunity to undertake work experience at any stage in their schooling career:

Yeah, I would like, that's why the only thing I was regretting not going into fourth year was to do work experience.

Was to do work experience.

Because you don't get to do that in fifth year and it should be in fifth year rather than fourth year.

*Interviewer:* And why would you like to do work experience?

Because you get more options like what to do or whatever. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

Most LCA students were enthusiastic about the work experience component of their course. Some described the work experience as 'brilliant' (Dawson Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake); the best thing about the programme (Argyle Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake); 'I loved it' (Belmore Street, LCA, girls' school, mixed intake).

*Interviewer:* And how do you think the work experience might benefit you?

Gives you an idea of what it's like to work.

It makes up your mind, what you're doing, you can make a plan in your head that you want to do something and you focus on that and then you go and do it.

If you don't like it.

You mightn't like it so you can make up your mind like that, if you don't want to do it or, then give you something else and you might love it and you want to do that and you focus on that. (Dixon Street, LCA, coed school, working-class intake)

Some students were pleased about work experience as they 'got a job out of it' (Dixon Street, LCA, coed school, working-class intake).

Yeah, I learned a lot from it, plus he's kind of offered me a job on Saturdays and stuff afterwards so learned a lot. (Wattle Street, LCVP, boys' school, mixed intake)

However, other students' experiences of work experience were negative, with some describing it as 'boring' (Dixon Street, LCA).

No I didn't like mine.

*Interviewer:* What happened?

I was in a toyshop all the time, hated it.

*Interviewer:* So was it very different from what you expected?

Yeah.

*Interviewer:* What did you expect?

I don't know but I didn't expect to pack boxes all the time. (Dawson Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students felt that the organisation of the work experience placements could be improved, in particular in terms of frequency, duration and scheduling.

I don't like the way they do the work experience here because they do it every Monday for ten weeks, I think it's better to have like a two week slot where you go to different places for three days so you get more in as well. When you're ten weeks in a place and if you don't like the place, it drags on. (Fig Lane, LCVP, coed school, middle-class intake)

Most students reported organising the work placements themselves: 'You've to go and do it yourself' (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake). However, some received teacher help: 'But the teacher said if you had difficulty, the school will help you like' (Park Street, LCVP, boys' school, mixed intake). Some students felt that the school should organise it for them:

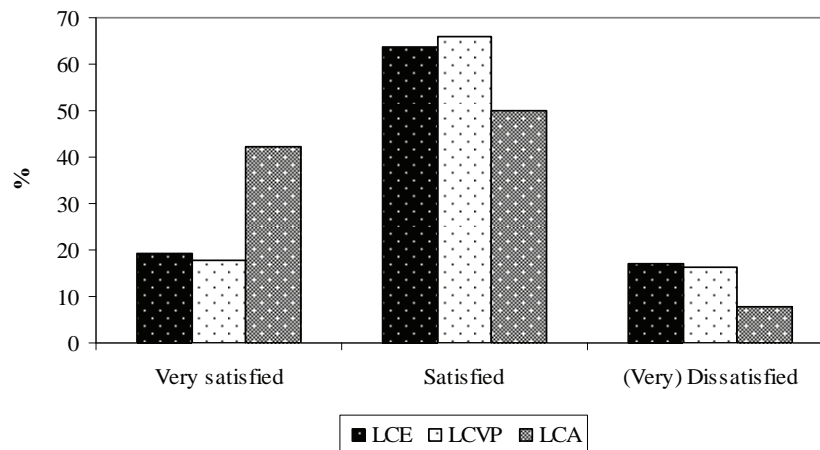
The school should try to get it for you because some people say would know a plasterer or a bricklayer but some people wouldn't, so they find it very hard to get work. (Hay Street, LCVP, coed school, working-class intake)

As in Transition Year (see Chapter Two), some students reported organising their work experience with their families, while others reported securing positions through their parental contacts: 'My dad got me work experience, I didn't count on my teacher at all, so I'm going to do that' (Belmore Street, LCVP, girls' school, mixed intake).

### 3.7 Perceptions of the Leaving Certificate Programmes

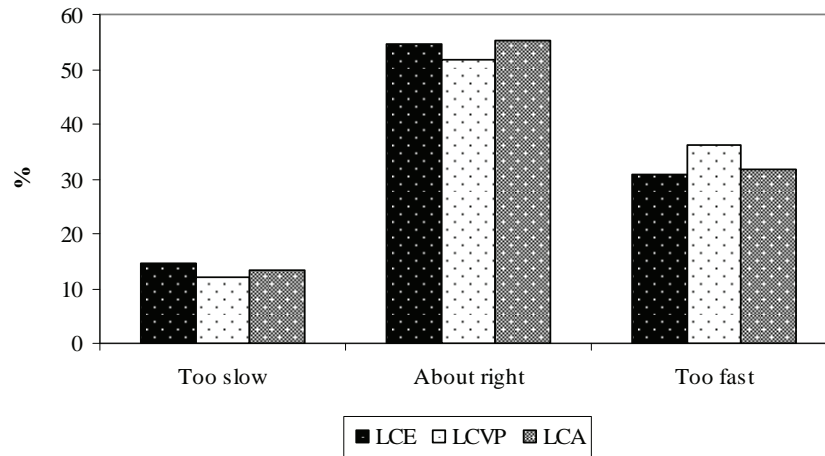
The majority of fifth year students were satisfied or very satisfied with the Leaving Certificate programme they were taking (Figure 3.5). Dissatisfaction levels were higher among LCE and LCVP students (16-17 per cent) compared with LCA students (8 per cent), reflecting the escalation of schoolwork demands experienced by LCE/LCVP students (see below). There is some variation within programmes across schools. In relation to LCVP, dissatisfaction levels are somewhat higher in Park Street, a boys' school, than in the other schools. In relation to LCE, dissatisfaction levels are higher in Wattle Street and Lang Street, both boys' schools with compulsory or quasi-compulsory Transition Year.

*Figure 3.5: Satisfaction by programme*



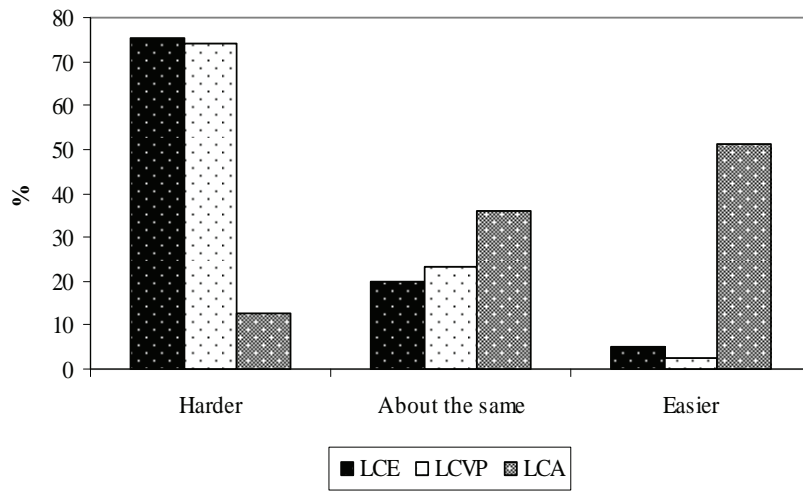
Just over half of fifth year students were satisfied with the pace of instruction in class. Over a third of students found the pace too fast while just over a tenth found it too slow (Figure 3.6). These perceptions did not vary significantly by the type of programme students were taking.

**Figure 3.6: Perceptions of pace of instruction by programme**

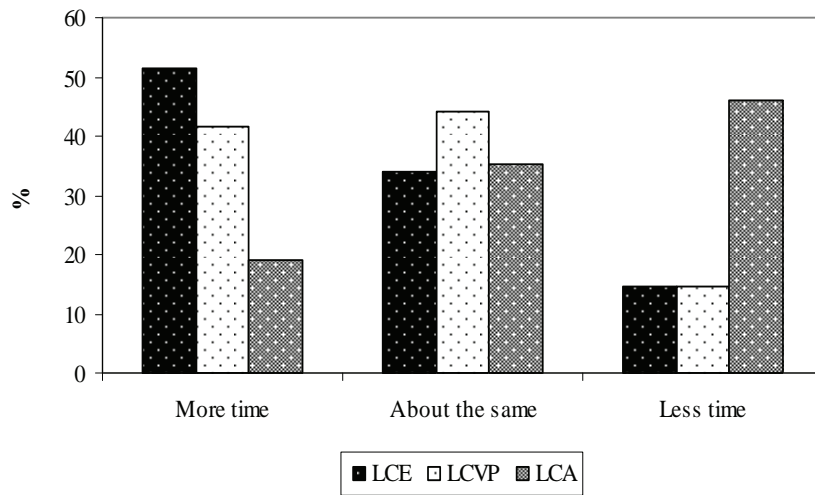


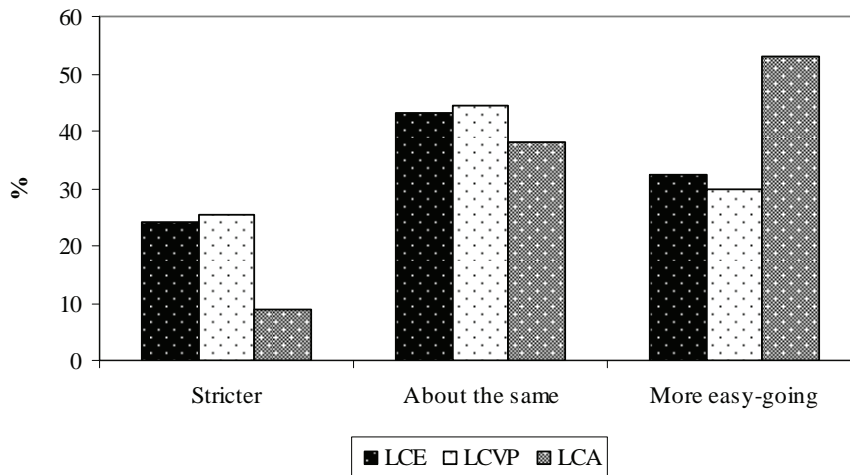
Students were asked to compare their experiences in fifth year with their experience in third year in terms of schoolwork, homework and relations with teachers. Clear differences were evident between LCA and other students. Almost four-fifths of LCE and LCVP students found homework harder in fifth year than in their Junior Certificate year; in contrast, half of LCA students found schoolwork easier than previously with only a very small proportion reporting that schoolwork was harder (Figure 3.7). LCE and LCVP students were divided between those who were spending more time on homework and study in fifth year than in third year and those who were spending about the same amount of time (Figure 3.8). In contrast, almost half of the LCA group was spending less time on homework, in keeping with the actual levels of homework reported above. LCE/LCVP students generally found their teachers about the same as in third year, with a fifth finding them stricter and a third finding them more easy-going (Figure 3.9). LCA students were more likely to consider their teachers easy-going rather than strict.

**Figure 3.7: Perceptions of schoolwork compared with JC year**



**Figure 3.8: Perceptions of homework compared with JC year**



**Figure 3.9: Perceptions of teachers compared with JC year**

Some variation was evident between the case-study schools in the experiences of those taking LCE. Students in Harris Street and Wattle Street, both schools with compulsory TY, were more likely to report schoolwork becoming more difficult in fifth year, while those in Dawes Point, a working-class boys' school, were much less likely to do so. Students in Wattle Street were also the most likely to report spending more time on homework in fifth year while Dawes Point students were least likely to do so. Students who had taken Transition Year were more likely to report an escalation in schoolwork and homework demands than other students, perhaps because they were implicitly making a comparison with their experiences in TY rather than in third year.

The extent to which students are satisfied with their programme is related to their perceptions of changes since third year. Dissatisfaction levels are highest among those who find schoolwork harder (19 per cent) compared with those who find schoolwork about the same (9 per cent) or even easier (4 per cent). Dissatisfaction levels are also somewhat higher among those who find teachers stricter than they had been in junior cycle.

In the group interviews, students were further questioned about their experiences of the Leaving Certificate programmes, and how fifth year compared to junior cycle. The amount, frequency and perceived diffi-



culty of homework varied across programmes, schools, and across subjects. Many students felt that all subjects involved very significant demands in terms of homework: 'They expect you to do loads of homework for each subject' (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake):

The homework we get is much more harder and there's more in it than third year or before. (Belmore Street, LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

Many students reported that there was more responsibility placed on them in regard to homework completion during fifth year. In this regard, many students reported a greater emphasis on expectations to study and self-monitor their work.

*Interviewer:* What about in terms of homework, is that any different?

It's a lot more.

It's more study than doing homework, you've to do more learning than homework, in third year we get homework but it's all learning now like.

It's up to you to do it like, you know. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Students reported greater teacher leniency in terms of homework completion and an increased emphasis placed on homework being in the student's own interest and to their benefit: 'They would say, it's going to come back on you, it's not me that's doing the exam at the end of the day' (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake).

And in first, second or third year if you don't have your homework done you might have to write it out five or six times, whereas now they say it's your loss, they treat you kind of like as if you're in college, where if you don't turn up for class, if you don't do the work then you're going to fail, instead of giving you punishment and stuff. (Belmore Street, LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

Some students reported much less homework than in the Junior Certificate year, with the lack of an immediate examination meaning less pressure and related schoolwork demands.

*Interviewer:* How would you compare this year with the previous year, the third year?

I suppose it's more of a doss this year.

*Interviewer:* Is it?

Well, no exams this year so not as much pressure.

*Interviewer:* What do the others think?

Not as much homework as last year. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students particularly liked the lack of homework they experienced as part of LCVP.

*Interviewer:* Anything else you like about LCVP?

You don't really get homework. (Dawson Street, LCVP, coed school, mixed intake)

A number of LCA students also reported that LCA did not demand a lot in the way of homework, but was more focused on project or 'task' work.

Don't usually get homework.

You do your tasks.

We do have task homework, we do that, other than that we don't get any homework. (Dixon Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake)

However, some students found the lack of homework demands problematic in terms of their progression through the course.

When you get no homework, it's really hard to motivate yourself to study, because you've got nothing to do. (Fig Lane, LCE, coed school, middle-class intake)

*Interviewer:* Is the LCA year what you expected it to be?

Yeah.

Yeah.

More or less.

Thought there'd be more work.

*Interviewer:* In what way?

Like we'd have more like homework and stuff.

*Interviewer:* Would you have liked a bit of homework?

Yeah.

Depends.

It helps just to prepare for next year. (Argyle Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake)

Students' general satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the programmes were discussed during the focus group interviews. Some of the LCE students' dissatisfaction derived from the lack of timely information about programme content, in particular about the LCVP (see above).

No, we're not doing work experience this year. Like the LCVP lads get to do it, they did pick the subjects like.

I don't see why we don't get to do it and they do.

Just because we didn't want to do LCVP.

I think the reason most of us aren't doing LCVP because we didn't want to do French.

Yeah, exactly.

That's the only reason.

It really is.

Because like if you knew like ....

If I knew that 60 per cent of your work would have been done before you even go into the exam like.

There's projects over the year and it's like that's 60 per cent of your Leaving Cert done already.

I probably, I would have picked it yeah.

They get more classes to go up and type on the computer. (Dawes Point, LCE, boys' school, working-class intake)

Some LCE students argued that the Leaving Certificate Established should be structured more like the LCA, with more engaging activities.

*Interviewer:* Would you like to change anything about this particular year?

More activities for us, just to get out or whatever.

*Interviewer:* Ok, do the LCA group get more activities?

Yeah they get computers, twenty classes a week or something.

And they go on trips.

Work experience.

They've got things to come into school for, we just come in and we're studying ... that's all we do all day. (Dixon Street, LCE, coed school, working-class intake)

As in the survey responses, the majority of students in the group interviews reported fifth year being more difficult than their previous year, with most describing the year as 'harder'. This was seen as reflecting an increased workload, higher expected standards and the more detailed coverage of subjects within the Leaving Certificate programme.

The subjects are more difficult like you know, really there's a lot more detail in them.

... You go much deeper into the topics that you used to be doing, like in History and stuff like that, you used to do kind of an overview but now you're going properly into it and stuff like that, Geography and stuff like that. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

There's some subjects that you do in Junior Cert and you do the same in Leaving Cert but then it's very different and it's kind of you get a shock, they don't really tell you what's in a subject before you pick it, you kind of pick it on what you did in junior cycle. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Written assignments were seen as more demanding because of the need to engage with material in a more detailed way, the requirement to write essay-type answers rather than brief responses and the terminology involved in many subjects.

It's kind of in Junior Cert you've more to say about your poems and stories because you introduce it, say you introduce it and you talk about it whereas in Irish they say in this poem by this person, you know talk about this and that's your whole like introductory thing gone. [Now] you just have to get straight into it ... and a lot of the time there isn't stuff to say you just kind of have to make it up and make it sound, it's making yourself sound good like ...

It's really hard to waffle this year. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

They use different words, completely different language like for Home Ec, the words that you would have used in Junior Cert is completely different now and there's a lot more detail given to one point. You'd have so much detail just for one thing like but last year they just tell you what it is and what you need to know but this year there's a lot like and they're like oh you have to learn this but don't learn that, you don't need to know that, so ... you kind of get confused as well when you're kind of revising it. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

The fast pace of instruction in some classes was seen as creating difficulties for some students in keeping up with their schoolwork:

I found that you can't really miss a day of school because you have so much to catch up on. (Wattle Street, LCE/LCVP, boys' school, mixed intake)

The presence of the Leaving Certificate exam was seen as creating 'pressure', with many students contrasting the 'easy' Junior Certificate with the 'hard' Leaving Certificate:

You stress in third year but looking back at it now it was like a walk in the park, it's like you wouldn't worry.

Exactly like you look at the third years today and you're like just don't stress. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

For some of the students who had taken Transition Year, fifth year was difficult in terms of readjusting to the normal routine and the demands of schoolwork and homework (see also Chapter Two). Some students found the pace too fast and struggled to keep up, suggesting that the pace of instruction was not conducive to real understanding.

They're too busy, the thing is this year there's so much on the course that they're flying through the course, they're saying, ok so they can say yeah I done chapter one to twenty in this amount of time, they're flying through the course, they're not checking homework, they're not checking to see are we up to, getting on with the work, they're just flying through the course because they're like oh blah, blah, blah, sixth year Leaving Cert, we need to get the course done. What's the point in getting the course done if you don't understand it? I'd rather understand half the course than not understand the whole course. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

However, some students found it easier to cope with the workload once they had settled into a 'routine', after fourth year:

*Interviewer:* You don't think it's too bad?

No. If you get into a routine it doesn't really feel too bad. There was no routine in fourth year, because a lot of people had work and sports commitments and that, so you didn't really have any time for homework, but if you get into a routine, like I'm in a routine and it doesn't really feel too bad. (Wattle Street, LCE, boys' school, mixed intake)

In terms of pace, while some students recommended the LCVP, others found the pace too slow and 'boring', and others felt that it was not as relaxed as promised.

*Interviewer:* What about LCVP? Would you advise students to take it?

Yeah, definitely, it's kind of bad the way you don't get supervised and everyone gets to go home early on Friday but then ... there's loads of opportunities for summer work experience and stuff in the different places. (Argyle Street, LCVP, coed school, mixed intake)

*Interviewer:* And how do you find it?

Nice.

It's grand, it can be boring.

It can be boring yeah ... constantly typing up stuff. (Belmore Street, LCVP, girls' school, mixed intake)

They told us the LCVP was like very relaxed and you'd do projects and stuff but it turned out to be a lot more strict. (Argyle Street, LCVP, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students felt that the pace of the LCA programme was much easier than the Junior Certificate. Some expressed this positively, in terms of being more 'more laid back, it's easier' (Argyle Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake). However, others found that the programme was insufficiently challenging:

*Interviewer:* OK, what about you, in terms of, did you get any choice and are you happy with the choice in terms of programme?

... like it is easy but it's a bit stupid.

*Interviewer:* Why?

Because you don't really, you don't do anything. (Dixon Street, LCA, coed school, working-class intake)

I thought it would be better like, I didn't think everything was, most subjects are nearly all foundation, I thought it would be all ordinary and higher and all, I thought it would be the same as straight Leaving Cert but it's not. (Dixon Street, LCA, coed school, working-class intake)

However, other LCA students felt that fifth year was much better than third year, and welcomed the lack of exams and focus on practical assessment:

Oh it's better than last year.

Yeah.

Yeah because you'd your exams last year, this year we've no exams.

Yeah, you do more practical things this year than we did last year.  
(Dawson Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake)

And you know it's not like in a normal Leaving Cert where you'd have to be studying the whole time. And doing like course work the whole time, you don't do much course work in LCA, you do more project work which is easier for you. (Belmore Street, LCA, girls' school, mixed intake)

Students varied in terms of their satisfaction with teachers during fifth year. As already outlined, many students noted that there was increased teacher leniency as regards homework completion. Others remarked that teachers were stricter last year because of the 'work, work, work' pressure of the Junior Certificate (Park Street, LCE, boys' school, mixed intake). However, other students noted that teachers had become stricter during senior cycle: 'Teachers are a lot stricter' (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake).

But they have to stop because they are getting really strict ... like since we came back in January it's like new rules, new this, new that, you're not allowed do anything, they're really like pushing it an awful lot. Trying to get us all to be quiet and just learn. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

Some students were very negative about their relationships with teachers in fifth year, an issue which is explored further in Chapter Six:

Well in third year they just, we were just kids, they treated us like, but now they treat us like adults kind of, now they treat us just like stupid adults that they have no respect for. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)



As well as facilitating learning (see above), smaller class sizes in fifth year were seen by students as enhancing their relationships with teachers. In addition, many students felt that relations with teachers improved because they were older and it was easier to have an ‘adult conversation’ ((Dawson Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake): ‘The teachers treat you as equals, they don’t treat you like children anymore’ (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake); ‘They treat you with a bit more respect I think because we’re a bit older’ (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake).

There’s definitely a better atmosphere in the class because, obviously the teacher holds that kind of authority figure but ... you don’t see someone’s as kind of like a dictator anymore because they’re willing to have a conversation. Like a proper conversation with you than before in third year I mean ... you just saw them for education value and they can see ... like they can talk to you in the corridor or something like they wouldn’t before like. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls’ school, working-class intake)

Some students attributed the stronger relationship with teachers to their experiences during Transition Year.

I think when we did TY you grew closer to your teachers, so you sort of have a friendship bond kind of more than like I’m your teacher, I’m your boss kind of thing; you have more of a connection with them. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls’ school, working-class intake)

In sum, the transition to fifth year involved more demanding schoolwork for the majority of those taking LCE and LCVP. The situation for LCA students was quite different, with many reporting a more manageable workload.

### **3.8 Conclusions**

The case-study schools differ in the Leaving Certificate programmes they provide, with provision relating to perceived suitability of the programme as well as school size. Clear differences are evident between the group of students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme and other students. LCA students are overwhelmingly from working-class or

non-employed households, have had lower academic achievement levels and higher levels of misbehaviour. They are also disproportionately students who had been allocated to a lower stream class or received learning support. In contrast, the LCE and LCVP programmes attract students from a variety of backgrounds.

Student learning experiences differ significantly across the programmes. LCA classes are more frequently characterised by active learning methods, including project work, group work and the use of ICT and audio/video facilities. In contrast, LCE and LCVP classes are often teacher-dominated in nature, involving students copying notes from the board or the teacher reading from a book, and have a strong emphasis on homework. Learning experiences for LCVP students are broadly similar to those for LCE students, but with a much greater use of work experience and ICT facilities.

The majority of students are satisfied with the programme they are taking in fifth year. LCA students find the programme easier and less demanding than the junior cycle course and are positive about the emphasis on continuous assessment and work experience. However, a number of students do not find the coursework sufficiently challenging and LCA does not meet their expectations in certain respects. In contrast, LCE and LCVP report an escalation in the demands of schoolwork and homework in moving from junior to senior cycle. Students report that standards are much higher and that they therefore feel under pressure to keep with their schoolwork. Some students who had taken Transition Year also reported (at least temporary) difficulties in settling into fifth year because they had become 'lazy' in the course of TY. In Chapter Six, we explore the transition to senior cycle from the perspective of key personnel and examine the extent to which student attitudes to school have changed over this transition.

## *Chapter Four*

# **LEAVING CERTIFICATE SUBJECTS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Chapter Three explored the pathways taken by students into the different Leaving Certificate programmes. For most students, this process also involves the selection of Leaving Certificate subjects. Students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme generally have little or no choice in the subjects they take, mainly because of the small size of the cohort taking the programme in each school (see Banks et al., 2010). Consequently, this chapter focuses, for the most part, on those students taking the Leaving Certificate Established or Leaving Certificate Vocational programmes, who can choose from syllabuses available in 33 subjects, although the nature of choice varies between the two programmes because of LCVP requirements. The number of subjects made available to students and the degree of choice afforded them have been found to vary across schools (see Hannan et al., 1983; Darmody and Smyth, 2005). This chapter explores the process of choosing subjects in the case-study schools, outlining the characteristics of students taking different subjects as well as the relationship between senior cycle subject take-up and experiences at junior cycle. It also examines student attitudes to the different subject areas in fifth year and the extent to which these attitudes have changed since junior cycle.

### **4.2 The Choice Process**

The timing and nature of the choice process differed across the case-study schools (see Table 4.1). Students generally made their subject choices late in third year, although in Hay Street, students chose their

subjects on entry to fifth year. Where students took Transition Year, they tended to choose their Leaving Certificate subjects towards the end of that year. The exception to this pattern was Wattle Street, where students chose their subjects before entering Transition Year. The nature of the choice also varied across schools (Table 4.1). In six of the schools, students were given an open list of subjects to rank in order of preference.

**Table 4.1: The timing and nature of subject choice**

School	Timing	Structure
Argyle Street	Late in third or Transition year	Open choice before form lines
Barrack Street	Late in third or Transition year	Restricted subject choice; some students didn't get their choices
Belmore Street	Late in third or Transition year	Open choice before lines are formed; almost all students get their choices
Dawes Point	Late in third year	Subjects packaged on lines
Dawson Street	Late in third or Transition year	Open choice before form lines but some subjects oversubscribed
Dixon Street	Late in third year	Restricted subject choice but determine provision on basis of student preferences
Fig Lane	Late in third or Transition Year	Subjects packaged on lines but students appear to get their choices
Harris Street	Late in Transition Year	Open choice before lines are formed to ensure students get their choices
Hay Street	Beginning of fifth year	Same lines (or packages) used every year; some subjects over-subscribed or not offered because of low numbers
Lang Street	Late in Transition Year	Open choice before lines are formed; students usually get (at least most of) their choices
Park Street	Late in third year	Open choice before lines are formed; some students didn't get their choices
Wattle Street	Before entry to TY	Subjects packaged on lines

Student preferences were then used to decide subject ‘packages’ or ‘lines’. For example, students could choose: one of History, Geography and French; one of German, French and Chemistry; one of Biology, History and Geography; and so on. Because these ‘lines’ were formed on the basis of student preference, most students obtained the subjects they wanted. Subject choice appeared to be more restricted in Barrack Street and Dixon Street, both small to medium working-class schools, with fewer subjects provided from which students could choose. In the four remaining schools, subjects were already formed into ‘lines’ from which students could choose. In this situation, the timetabling of optional subjects could constrain student choice by requiring them to choose from a list of predetermined subjects.

The vast majority (95 per cent) of fifth year students in the case-study schools reported having had a choice of Leaving Certificate subjects. LCA students were much less likely to report having a choice, with almost three-quarters reporting a lack of choice. The focus group interviews explored the extent and nature of subject choice at senior cycle, issues which had also been addressed in interviews with key personnel. As the survey results suggest, for most LCA students, the issue of choice was not as relevant as they were restricted to choosing among a limited number of options.

*Interviewer:* So in terms of subject choice, when did you choose the subjects for Leaving Certificate?

We didn’t.

We don’t, we’re assigned.

The subjects for the LCA are assigned to you, if you’re doing the ordinary [Leaving Cert] you can pick whatever you want. (Dawson Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake)

*Interviewer:* Could you tell me about that procedure – how was the choice presented to you?

They give you a form with just the choice of Woodwork and Home Economics and you pick whatever one you want and then you see if you can get it and then that’s it.

It was only Home Economics and Woodwork isn't it, the only two, you pick whatever but if the place is full then you just have to do the other one.

I never got my option. (Dixon Street, LCA, coed school, working-class intake)

While many non-LCA students were able to choose freely from a full range of subjects, others reported being constrained to one subject from each 'line' (sometimes termed 'package' or 'block') which meant that certain combinations were not possible:

I kind of wanted to do engineering after I leave school so I picked Physics but really Physics was in with Tech Graphics so I couldn't really pick Tech Graphics as well. (Dawes Point, LCVP, boys' school, working-class intake)

Some students claimed that 'you mightn't get whatever you wanted' (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake), with classes being over-subscribed or options clashing. Alternatively, some students reported too few students expressing an interest in a particular subject, with the result that the subject was not provided in that particular year.

Some students, especially those in Harris Street, a middle-class girls' school, were very positive about the arrangements at their school which enabled them, as far as possible, to get their preferred subject choices:

You get a choice of about ten or eleven, you don't have to choose a block A which is three subjects, which in other schools you do, you actually get to pick.

Yeah and they build it around you so they say about eight people in every year won't get what they want but most people get their three subjects because like they build, they see ok this many people want this and this many want that so we'll try and build as many classes.

They build the timetable around us. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

It is worth noting that, even in this school, some students reported having to compromise. However, a few of these latter students were able to continue their interest in the subject by taking the course outside school.

And then it was kind of like well I wanted this, I'm going to have to pick something else now, kind of like something you didn't want as much, but I suppose that's life you know.

Yeah the same, I [would] prefer to do German instead of French but I was never told in Junior Cert that there was a possibility that I wouldn't be able to do it for Leaving Cert so I have to do it outside of school now. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

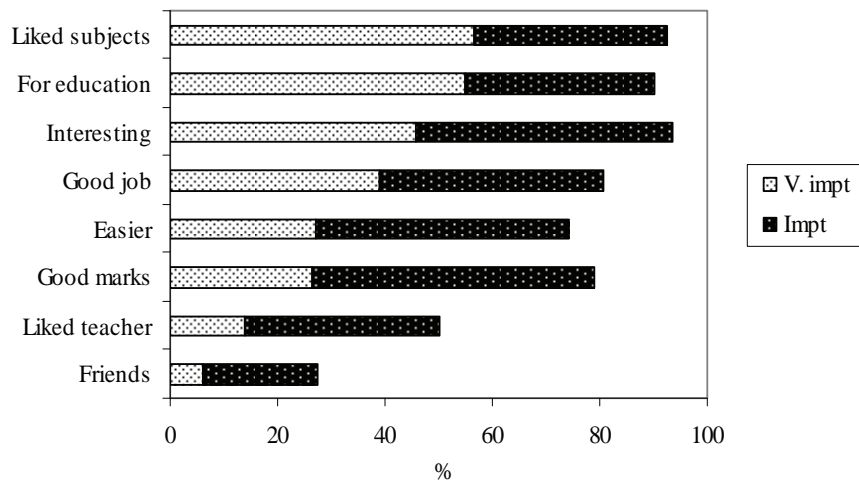
Taking the subject outside of school was not an option for all, however, with one student reporting significant consequences for their study plans:

But that's what I wanted like because I had my heart set on doing forensics and I needed Chemistry and Biology and I was told I wasn't allowed to do it ... Because like for me when I leave school I'm going to have to go through probably another three years of doing Chemistry before I can actually go to college to do forensics when I could have done the course for my Leaving Cert and I wouldn't have to go through all that. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

#### *4.2.1 Reasons for Subject Choice*

In the survey of fifth years, students were asked about possible reasons for selecting the subjects they chose. Students reported a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for selecting subjects. Liking the subjects and finding these subjects the most interesting were important factors for the vast majority of students. However, needing these subjects for further education/training or to get a good job were also deemed important by a very high proportion of students. Considering it easy to do well in a subject or receiving good marks in these subjects were important factors for a majority, and considered very important by more than a quarter. Liking the subject teacher was deemed important by around half of fifth year students. Friends appear to be a less important influence in choosing subjects in comparison with choosing programmes (see Chapter Three), although they are important for around a quarter of students.

**Figure 4.1: Reasons for selecting Leaving Certificate subjects (per cent 'very important' and 'important')**



Differences were evident among groups of students in the factors guiding their choices. Female students were more likely than male students to cite intrinsic reasons, namely, finding the subjects interesting and liking the subjects, a pattern which is consistent with their greater engagement in schoolwork at junior cycle level (Smyth et al., 2007). They were also more likely to mention needing the subject(s) for further education, perhaps reflecting the greater tendency of female students to expect to go on to higher education. Male students were more likely to cite it being easier to do well in a subject as a very important reason for choosing it as were those around the middle of the performance distribution. Male students were also more likely to cite friends as a factor in subject choice. Students who had received higher Junior Certificate grades were more likely to report intrinsic interest in a subject (finding it interesting or liking it) but also needing the subject for further education. Having received good Junior Certificate grades in the subject was a more important factor for those who had taken Transition Year, not surprisingly given that other students generally had to choose subjects before they received their exam results (see Table 4.1). Friends and job requirements were less of an influence on subject choice among those who had taken Transition Year and more of an influence for



those in the lowest-performing group. There was little systematic variation in responses by social class or ethnic/cultural background. However, (the small number of) Traveller students were more likely to cite having received good grades or their friends' choices as a factor than other students.

The group interviews explored student reasons for choosing particular Leaving Certificate subjects in greater depth. Fifth year student responses were varied, ranging from interest in, and liking, the subject to other considerations, including ability and future relevance to their post-school plans such as college entry requirements. While some students seemed to rely on a number of different considerations when making their subject choices, including future study plans at college, others highlighted that this had not been a major consideration at the time: 'But everybody picked what they think they were good at and not what they needed' (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake).

*Interviewer:* And how did you decide what subjects to pick for fifth year?

Whatever I thought I might like.

Stuff like in Junior Cert and stuff like that.

Yeah, what you're good at.

Yeah, what was interesting.

But the other things like business we hadn't really done so it's more like what you think you'd like, like that's how I chose it you know.

Yeah, kind of like maybe what you think you want to do in college or if you have like an idea of what you want.

Because if you don't like the subject, you're obviously not going to want to do well in it, you know what I mean, so it's kind of really important. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Friendship groups appeared to be less important in subject choices than with respect to senior cycle programme choices (see above), with most students focusing more on liking the subject, ability in the subject and college requirements.

Yeah, you just want to get the subjects to go to college, so I don't think it mattered as much, it did matter a wee bit like, that maybe you wouldn't be in all classes with some of your friends but it wasn't as bad I'd say as when you were in first year. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

For some, the issue was straightforward and related to the perceived 'easiness' of a particular subject:

*Interviewer:* Why do people want to do Geography?

Because that's the easiest. (Park Street, LCE, boys' school, mixed intake)

Students who did not take a particular subject at Junior Certificate expressed reluctance to then take up this subject at senior cycle, citing excessive demands in coming to grips with a new subject area:

I didn't do Science from first to third year so I didn't pick that for fifth year because there's no point because it would be too hard. (Barrack Street, TY, girls' school, working-class intake)

The issue of the influence of junior cycle choices and experiences on later subject take-up will be addressed in greater depth later in the chapter.

The situation for students who had taken Transition Year was quite different to that for those proceeding directly into fifth year. Many felt that TY provided the chance to try out new subjects not previously studied and thus expand the range of possible options. In addition, access to career guidance classes or modules during Transition Year provided students with additional information on the requirements for future course or career options.

Because it's just like, I was going to pick Art but now with thinking about it you'd have loads more choices, because with career guidance you get told everything and so you just don't have to pick one thing, you've got like so many different courses. (Harris Street, current TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

In Transition Year when we were doing Chemistry I just realised how much I liked it and I kept it on then. (Belmore Street, former TY, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

In all but one of the schools, students were allowed to choose subjects at the end of Transition Year, which meant that they had received their Junior Certificate results before making the choice for fifth year. Prior performance thus emerged as an important factor for some:

*Interviewer:* And how did you mainly decide what subjects to pick?

Just like I kind of looked at how I did in the Junior Cert as well, just what I liked. (Harris Street, LCE, ex-TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

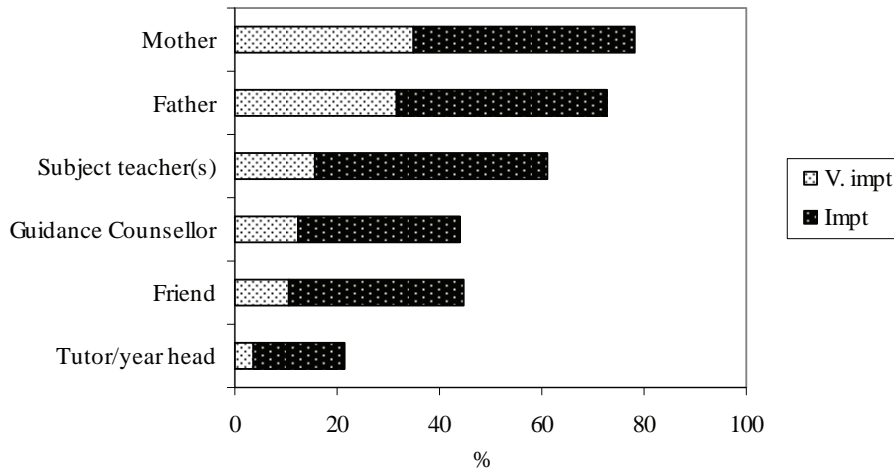
#### 4.2.2 Sources of Advice

Students were asked about the relative importance of different people in assisting them with deciding on subjects. As in programme choice, the main sources of support are parents (Figure 4.2). In contrast, friends assume a less significant role in relation to subject choice than they did in choosing a programme. Subject teachers assume a relatively important role in assisting subject choice while guidance counsellors are deemed a very important source of advice by a relatively small group of students. One in five students consider their class tutor or year head an important or very important source of assistance.

Parents were considered important across all groups of students. However, some differences were evident in relation to the role of other people. Female students were more likely to consider the guidance counsellor important; around half did so compared with a minority of male students. They were also more likely to consider subject teachers as important. Students from working-class or non-employed backgrounds were somewhat more reliant on guidance counsellors and class tutors/year heads (and, to some extent, subject teachers) than those from professional or farming backgrounds. Students who had achieved lower grades in the Junior Certificate were more reliant on the tutor/year head and their friends than other students. The guidance counsellor and tutor/year head were considered less important by those who had taken Transition Year, most likely reflecting the fact that students usually had

an opportunity to sample different Leaving Certificate subjects in the course of the programme (see Chapter Two). Newcomer (immigrant) students were somewhat more likely to consider the guidance counsellor and their friends very important than other students and much more likely to consider the tutor/year head important. The tutor/year head was also considered more important by Traveller students as were friends.

**Figure 4.2: Relative importance of different sources of advice**



Confirming the survey findings, students during the focus groups reported a variety of different sources of information and advice in making their Leaving Certificate subject choices. As with the advice on which programme to take, some relied on older siblings for advice: 'I asked my sister who was a year older than me' (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake), while others reported speaking to their parents. The subject teachers, often in conjunction with the use of aptitude or interests tests, also provided many students with information to assist their choices.

If you wanted to know, all you had to do was ask the teacher that was going to be teaching that subject. (Dawes Point, LCE, boys' school, working-class intake)

Subject teachers had an important role in providing advice to students, given that they would be quite familiar with the capability of the students. As the following quotation illustrates, teacher expectations, or lack of them, is an important factor in student decision-making.

It's [Home Economics] not easy but once you put your work into it, you're grand.

But [teacher name] turned us off because she was saying no, you won't be able for it, this is very hard and all, you will have to put like your full two years into it.

They will be honest with you though, if they don't think you're able for it, they're not going to say ah it's a grand subject, you'll get good points on it. They don't think you are able for it, they're not going to like advise you on it. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

However, notwithstanding the sources of advice, students often reported that the decision was ultimately "up to yourself" (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake):

But like my parents left it up to me because they know that I know what kind of subjects I'm good at, you know that sort of way so they left it up to me. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake).

I'd say I probably would have talked it over with my parents yeah but at the end of the day I just keep on what I want to, I don't think it should matter what anyone else wants.

*Interviewer:* What about you?

The same really, my parents kind of advised me but at the end of the day it was my choice, they weren't pushing me. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students reported not listening to the advice provided by their parents:

*Interviewer:* Was it the case that parents wanted you to do something different?

Yeah well like mam wanted me to keep on a language but I didn't.

The same with mine, my mother wanted me to do more higher but I just didn't want to. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

#### 4.2.3 Guidance Counselling Provision

Chapter Three indicated the kinds of guidance provision available to students regarding subject choice. For a significant minority of students, the guidance counsellor was an important source of advice on subject choice (see Figure 4.2). In the group interviews, many students reported receiving a comprehensive programme of advice relating to their senior cycle subject choices and were happy with the amount and content of the information provided.

We did the DATs test and it told us like our strong points and weak points, and like we had to tell them [guidance counsellor] what we want to be, and like, then for the subjects they will tell us if we are suited to them, like if our strong points are for that subject, and stuff like that. (Fig Lane, TY, coed school, middle-class intake)

However, a number of students expressed dissatisfaction as to the timing and content of the information offered to them regarding subject choice. Some felt that they chose their subjects at a time when they were not sufficiently aware of their future career plans.

I think it's too early to pick courses in third year like you know there is another two years to go like. So what's the point in trying to pick a course in third year when you don't know what you are going to do like? (Hay Street, LCVP, coed school, working-class intake)

*Interviewer:* Were you given any advice about the kinds of subjects you need for different careers?

We were only given that now in this [fifth] year.

A bit too late for it really like. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students felt ill-informed as to the consequences of their choices for later outcomes, in particular, the implications for further study.

It's real hard though as well because in third year you're only fifteen, going on sixteen, and you've to pick your subjects that you want to do for your Leaving Cert and they depend on what you're going to do in later life, like in third year and it was really hard.

They don't tell you that either.

They don't tell you the subjects that you pick are going to affect whether you can do a course after school or not and that's only this [fifth] year you realise like. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

In addition, the 'wrong' choice of subject also related to finding a particular subject too difficult at Leaving Certificate level, perhaps because of an inadequate grounding in the subject at junior cycle and lacking interest in, or being unaware of, the subject content.

*Interviewer:* So what advice were you given about the subjects you would take?

Nothing.

Didn't talk to anyone.

Didn't, no.

If you wanted to, you had to go talk to the guidance counsellor.

They don't give you any information like.

When I went in, I had no Science background, I only had Home Economics and when I went into Biology it was like double Dutch to me, I just couldn't understand it. And after about a month I said I can't take this so I went and talked to the guidance counsellor like and she said you can change if you want, but other people have went and they weren't allowed places like. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

Just to know what's involved ... like some people have dropped down to pass because they just didn't like the subject, probably because they didn't know about it in the first place so.

To make a better choice you need to have information. (Belmore Street, LCVP, girls' school, mixed intake)

In particular, students who were dissatisfied felt that more information should have been provided on the content of particular subjects.

*Interviewer:* Are there subjects you've taken you might have liked more information about them?

Yes, I thought it [Physics] would be like lasers and rockets and things and machines and it's not. (Park Street, LCE, boys' school, mixed intake)

It'd be handy if they gave us like some kind of sheet or something telling us like about courses in, like you know, colleges or universities, telling you what subjects you need for certain courses. Because then like if you say well I might be interested in that course then you know to pick that subject. But we didn't get anything like that. (Barack Street, TY, girls' school, working-class intake)

Students differed in their rating of the usefulness of the mode of guidance provision, that is, in timetabled classes or through one to one sessions. In keeping with findings from an earlier study (McCoy et al., 2006), many students preferred to receive advice on a one-to-one basis, as it provided the chance to ask questions without embarrassment: 'Yeah and you won't be afraid to ask questions, you're scarlet, some people are scarlet' (Dixon Street, LCE, coed school, working-class intake). Individual appointments also provided the opportunity to address the student's own interests and preferences:

*Interviewer:* In terms of guidance, do you prefer classes or one-to-one?

The one-to-one session because when you're doing the class, [there are] too many people asking different questions and the teacher can't give each person the amount of time, like you might have ten questions about your course. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)



However, some students seemed to find having to make the appointments themselves problematic. Some reported the guidance counsellor as being frequently busy and therefore hard to arrange a time with.

But she's like booked up, like ... it's like the end of next year, she's booked up for the next five months or something. And it's like people who don't even need her like go ... just like to get a class off. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

Others seemed just to find the scheduling difficult in itself since 'you have to ask and make an appointment' (Lang Street, LCE, boys' school, working-class intake):

Yeah it's kind of like hard to get because you all sign up to get it or whatever but I wish they'd come to you and say 'come here and I'll tell you'. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Other students preferred group sessions as it provided the opportunity to learn from other students.

Because then you get to hear, when we're talking about subjects you get to hear what everybody else is going to do so you might know what's going to come up and stuff like that. (Lang Street, TY, boys' school, working-class intake)

*Interviewer:* Do you prefer one-to-one career guidance or a class?

Classes.

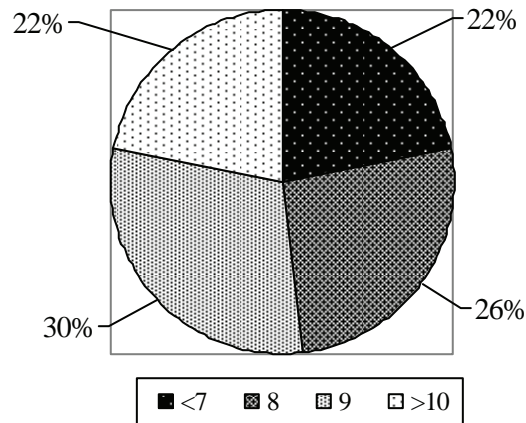
*Interviewer:* Why is class better?

I suppose one-on-one would be more effective because it's just ... I know you can see what other people are doing and might get other interests like. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

In sum, students differed in terms of the sources of advice upon which they relied. Students were more reliant on informal sources of advice, especially their parents, although formal guidance provision assumed a more significant role at this stage than previously. Students were mixed in their views regarding the guidance they received, with some highlighting the need for more information on the content of subjects as well as their usefulness for subsequent career pathways.

### **4.3 Number and Type of Subjects Taken**

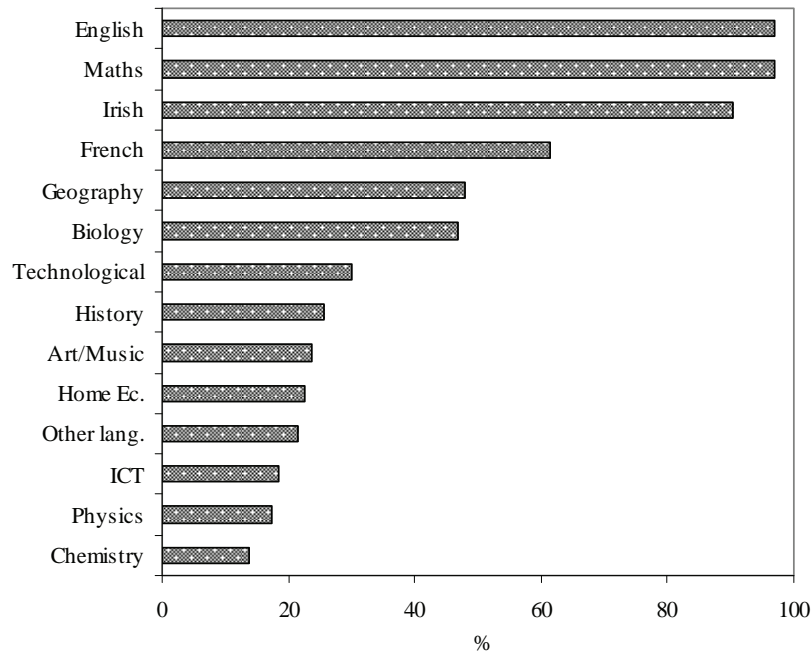
Among LCE and LCVP students, the average number of subjects (including both exam and non-exam subjects) taken was nine. There was, however, some variation around this average; a fifth of students reported taking seven (or fewer) subjects, a quarter took eight subjects, while a fifth took ten or more subjects (see Figure 4.3). LCVP students took significantly more subjects than LCE students (9.3 compared with 8.5), reflecting the fact that in a number of the case-study schools, LCVP link modules were taken as an 'extra' subject. Variation was also evident between schools; students in Dawson Street, a mixed intake coeducational school, took the highest number of subjects (9.6) while those in Barrack Street, a working-class girls' school, took the fewest (7.7). This pattern only partly reflected differential provision of LCVP across the case-study schools so appears to be related to policy and practice at the individual school level. Among LCE students, those in Dawson Street, a co-educational school with a mixed intake, took the most subjects while those in Barrack Street and Fig Lane (schools with contrasting social intakes) took the fewest. Among LCVP students, those in Argyle Street (a mixed intake school) took the most and those in Hay Street (a working-class school) took the fewest. Newcomer (immigrant) students tended to take fewer subjects in fifth year (8.2 compared with 8.8), reflecting the fact that most of these students were exempt from taking Irish. The number of subjects taken was also lower among those currently in receipt of extra help within school, again reflecting an exemption from taking Irish or another language.

**Figure 4.3: Number of LCE/LCVP subjects taken**

The following figure (Figure 4.4) shows the type of subjects taken by fifth year students. It should be noted that schools vary in their provision of particular subject areas so that the figures relate to the number of students taking the subject as a proportion of *all* LCE and LCVP students in the case-study schools. Figure 4.4 therefore shows the extent to which students access different subject areas at senior cycle. Almost all students report studying English and Maths while the vast majority (90 per cent) study Irish. Six in ten students study French with a fifth taking another language. Just under half of the cohort study History and Biology. Almost a third of students study at least one technological subject<sup>1</sup> while a fifth take Home Economics or Art/Music. Physics and Chemistry are studied by a minority of students (17 per cent and 13 per cent respectively). While this figure focuses on exam subjects, with most students also taking Religious Education and Physical Education, it is worth noting that almost a fifth of students take some form of computer studies in fifth year.

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<sup>1</sup> Technological subjects include Engineering, Construction Studies and Technical Graphics.

**Figure 4.4: Subjects taken in fifth year (LCE and LCVP students only)**

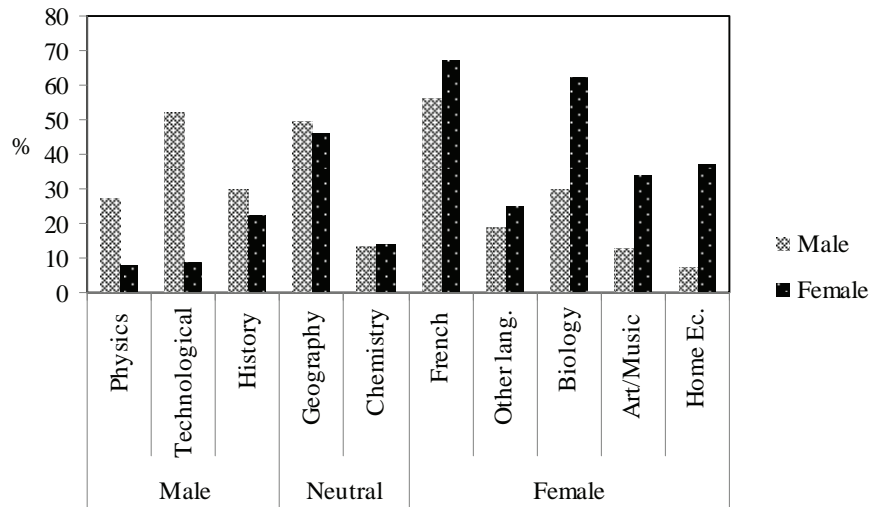
#### 4.3.1 Subject Take-up and Student Characteristics

This subsection explores the extent to which the take-up of particular subjects varies by student characteristics, including gender, social class background and prior achievement. In keeping with the national patterns, clear gender differences are evident in senior cycle subject take-up. Female students are more likely to take Home Economics, Art/Music, Biology, French and other languages (Figure 4.5). In contrast, male students are over-represented in Physics, technological subjects and, to some extent, History. Apart from English, Irish and Maths, only Geography and Chemistry emerge as gender-neutral in take-up patterns.

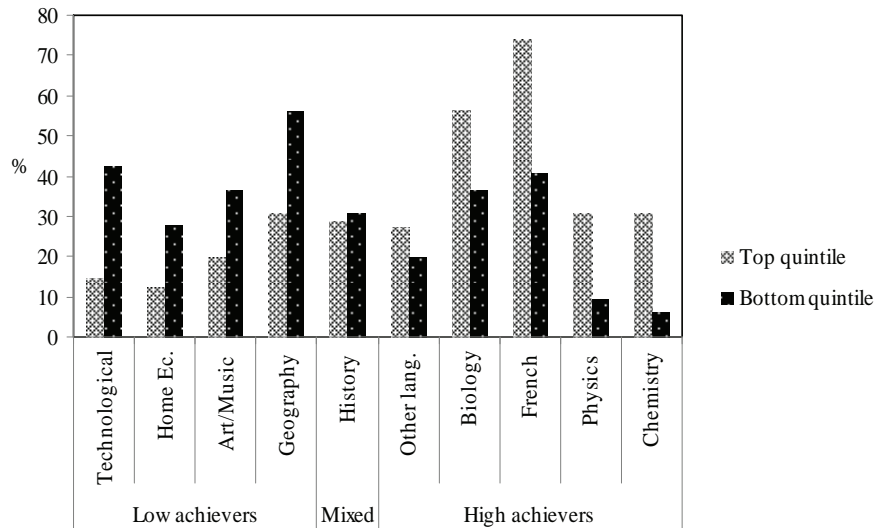
In general, subject take-up does not differ markedly across the social class groups. However, the take-up of Biology is somewhat lower among those from semi/unskilled or non-employed households. French take-up is significantly associated with social class; 70 per cent of the higher professional group take French compared with around half of those from less skilled/unemployed backgrounds. There are some class variations in

the take-up of other languages than French, but the differences are not as marked.

**Figure 4.5: Take-up of subjects by gender**



The subjects taken vary significantly by prior achievement levels. Figure 4.6 contrasts the proportion of students from the lowest quintile (fifth) of Junior Certificate grades with the highest quintile. This allows us to look at whether particular subjects attract the ‘high achievers’, the ‘low achievers’ or a mixture of abilities. Technological subjects, Home Economics, Art/Music and Geography are taken by a greater proportion of low-achieving students than of students with the highest Junior Certificate grades. The take-up of History does not vary by prior achievement levels. Biology, French and other languages tend to attract students with higher Junior Certificate grades. Chemistry and Physics are even more strongly influenced by prior grades; 31 per cent of the top quintile take Chemistry compared with only 6 per cent of the bottom quintile. A similar pattern is evident in relation to Physics; 31 per cent of the top quintile take the subject compared with 9 per cent of the bottom quintile.

**Figure 4.6: Subject take-up by prior Junior Certificate achievement**

Students who have taken Transition Year are more likely to take Art/Music than other students. They are also more likely to take Chemistry (21 per cent v. 9 per cent), French (67 per cent v. 58 per cent), History (31 per cent v. 22 per cent), and other languages (26 per cent v. 19 per cent). In contrast, they are much less likely to take technological subjects (18 per cent v. 38 per cent). However, as we have seen in Chapter Two, the profile of Transition Year participants is very different from non-participants. Later analyses will explore whether TY has a net effect on subject take-up, controlling for student characteristics.

Take-up of subjects also varies by school. Take-up of Art/Music is highest in Dixon Street and Hay Street, both working-class schools, but is also high in Fig Lane, a middle-class school. The take-up of science subjects is not markedly related to school characteristics since take-up of Biology is highest in Argyle Street, a mixed coeducational school, and Barrack Street, a working-class girls' school. Similarly, Chemistry take-up is highest in Belmore Street (a mixed girls' school), Wattle Street (a mixed boys' school) and Dawes Point (a working-class boys' school). Home Economics take-up is highest in Harris Street, a middle-class girls' school, and Hay Street, a working-class coed school. Two schools, Barrack Street and Hay Street, have much lower levels of take-up of

Irish than other schools, reflecting the number of newcomer (immigrant) students attending those schools. Take-up of technological subjects is highest in Hay Street and Dawes Point, schools with an overrepresentation of working-class boys.

Analyses were conducted to assess whether the factors influencing subject choice were associated with the subjects actually selected. Emphasising subject requirements for further education/training was associated with higher levels of Biology, Chemistry and Physics take-up and, to some extent, French take-up. This pattern would appear to reflect the educational aspirations of the higher-achieving students who take these subjects. Finding the subject interesting was somewhat associated with higher levels of Chemistry take-up as were job requirements (the latter was also the case for Physics). Wanting a subject that is easy to do well in was associated with Geography take-up, most likely reflecting the influence of lower prior achievement levels. Friends' subject choices were associated with Home Economics take-up but did not influence the take-up of other subjects. There were few systematic relationships between patterns of subject take-up and the perceived importance of different sources of advice regarding subject choice. However, students who regarded their friends as an important support were more likely to take Geography and Home Economics than other students.

Table 4.2 presents a set of multilevel logistic regression models which analyse the influence of background characteristics on subject take-up at senior cycle. The models indicate the likelihood of particular groups of students taking the subject in question across all schools, whether or not the school provides the subject. Even controlling for social class and prior achievement, clear gender differences are evident, with female students more likely to take Biology, Home Economics and Art/Music, and significantly less likely to take Physics or technological subjects. The three science subjects and French tend to attract students with higher achievement levels. In contrast, lower-achieving students are more likely to take Geography, Home Economics, Art/Music and technological subjects. Social class background has little influence once prior achievement is taken into account, although students from higher professional backgrounds are less likely than other students of similar

Table 4.2: Multilevel logistic regression models of subject take-up ( $n=721$ )

	French	Other languages	History	Geography	Physics	Chemistry	Biology	Technological	Home Ec.	Art/Music
Constant	0.105	-1.274	-1.041	-0.148	-0.921	-2.158	-1.011	0.200	-2.650	-2.056
Female	0.452*	0.382	-0.209	-0.151	-2.176***	-0.362	1.339***	2.253***	2.126***	1.454***
Higher prof.	0.205	-0.076	-0.231	0.004	-0.043	0.293	-0.053	0.121	-0.523 $\Delta$	-0.052
JC grades (centred on mean)	0.289***	0.106	0.033	-0.299***	0.656***	0.504***	0.053	-0.171*	-0.457***	-0.205**
Took TY	0.245	-0.050	0.523*	0.048	0.162	0.857**	0.033	-0.473 $\Delta$	-0.267	0.304
School-level variance	0.134	0.572*	0.441 $\Delta$	0.275 $\Delta$	0.114	0.350	0.162 $\Delta$	0.737*	0.355 $\Delta$	0.483 $\Delta$

Note: \*\*\*,  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ ,  $\Delta$   $p < .10$ .

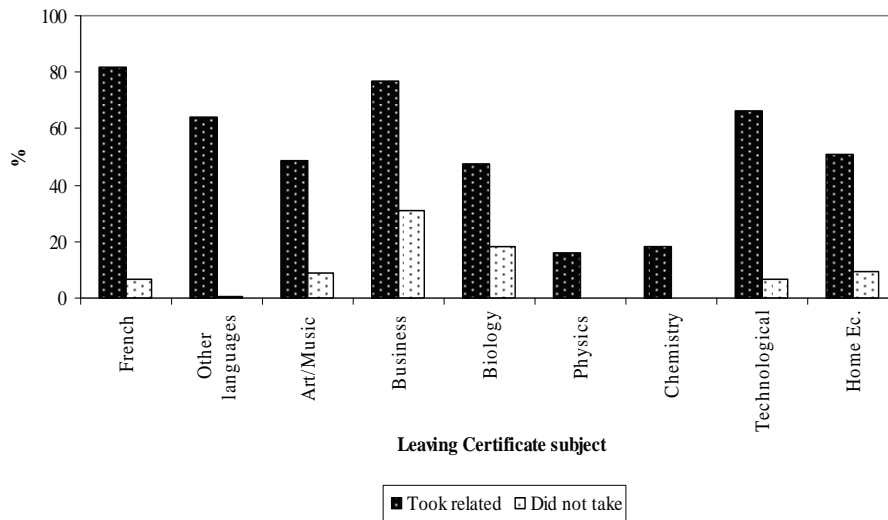


achievement levels to take Home Economics. Taking Transition Year has little effect on the type of subjects selected. However, TY participants are somewhat more likely to take History and less likely to take technological subjects. The latter pattern may relate to the fact that technological subjects are less commonly provided as part of the TY programme than other subject areas (see Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). The school-level variance term indicates that schools vary in the take-up levels of a number of these subject areas, even taking account of student composition (gender, social background and prior achievement). Thus, school provision and approach to subject choice appear to shape the likelihood of students taking particular subject areas.

#### *4.3.2 Subject Take-up and Experiences at Junior Cycle*

Choices made at junior cycle were predictive of later subject choices, with students more likely to take subjects of which they had previous relevant experience. Figure 4.7 can be interpreted as follows: almost half of students who took the related subject, Junior Certificate Science, went on to take Biology compared with under a fifth of those who had not taken Science. In contrast, only students who had taken Science at junior cycle went on to take Physics or Biology at senior cycle, a pattern which is consistent with earlier findings on science take-up (Smyth and Hannan, 2002). It is clear that the extent to which senior cycle subject take-up relies on having prior experience in that subject varies across subjects (see Figure 4.7). Students are quite unlikely to take Physics, Chemistry, languages, Art/Music, Home Economics or technological subjects if they have not taken a related subject at junior cycle. As indicated, there is some movement of students who had not taken Science previously into Leaving Certificate Biology and a significant amount of movement into business subjects among students with no prior experience of such subjects.

**Figure 4.7: Take-up of Leaving Certificate subjects by take-up of related subject at junior cycle**

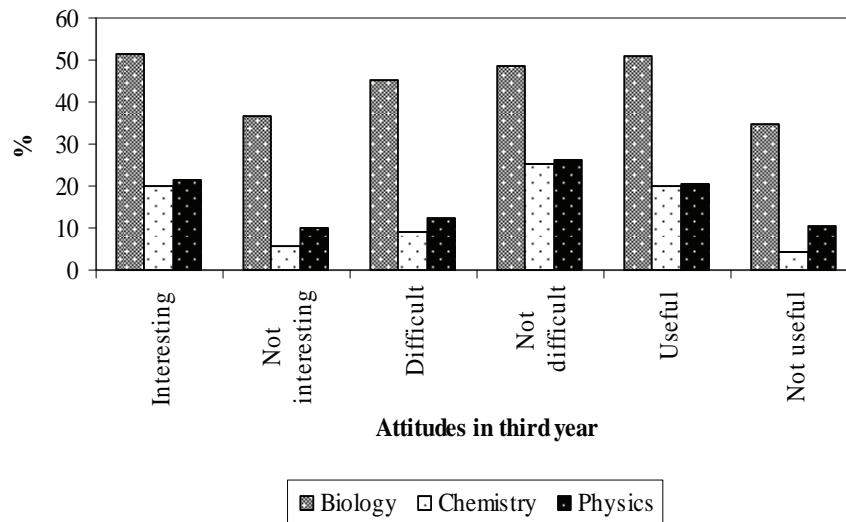


As well as being related to prior subject take-up, senior cycle choices appear to reflect the attitudes formed in relation to particular subjects over the course of the junior cycle. In the case of French, for example, students were significantly more likely to take the subject if they had found it interesting in third year; 91 per cent of those who found it interesting in third year went on to take fifth year French compared with 72 per cent of those who did not find it interesting. They were less likely to take French if they had found it difficult at junior cycle (72 per cent as opposed to 87 per cent) or if they did not think the subject was useful (66 per cent as opposed to 86 per cent).

Attitudes to Science at junior cycle are found to have differential effects on the take-up of Biology, Physics and Chemistry (Figure 4.8). Students were more likely to take the three science subjects if they had found junior cycle Science interesting and/or useful. However, students were unlikely to take Physics or Chemistry if they had found Science difficult while perceived difficulty had no impact on subsequent Biology take-up. The relationship between perceptions of junior cycle Science and subsequent take-up of Physics and Chemistry is evident from as

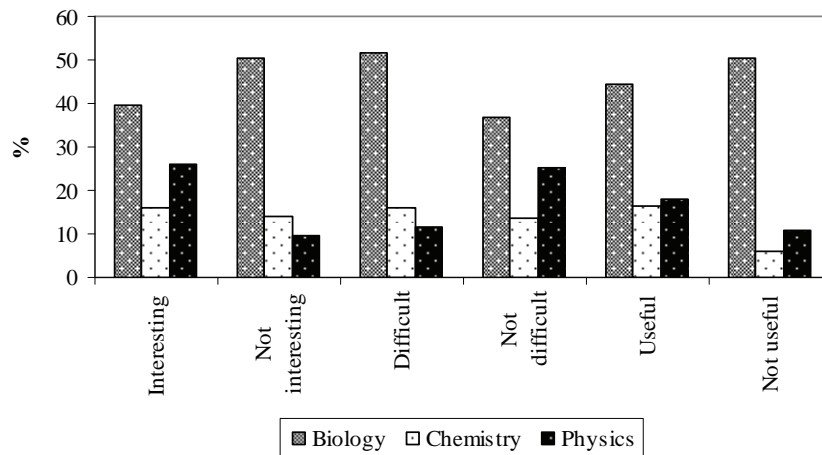
early as the end of first year. Thus, attitudes to subjects formed early in the junior cycle are predictive of the routes students take subsequently.

**Figure 4.8: Take-up of science at senior cycle by attitudes to Science at junior cycle**



The influence of attitudes to Maths more clearly differentiates between Biology and the other science subjects. Students were more likely to take Physics if they had found junior cycle Maths interesting, useful and not difficult (Figure 4.9). For Chemistry, attitudes to Maths are not as predictive of take-up as for Physics, although students are more likely to take Chemistry if they found Maths useful. The pattern is quite different for Biology; students are more likely to take Biology if they had more negative attitudes to junior cycle Maths, particularly if they did not find Maths interesting. This is in keeping with previous research which indicates that Biology tends to provide a route for less mathematically-inclined young people (Smyth and Hannan, 2002).

**Figure 4.9: Take-up of science at senior cycle by attitudes to Maths at junior cycle**



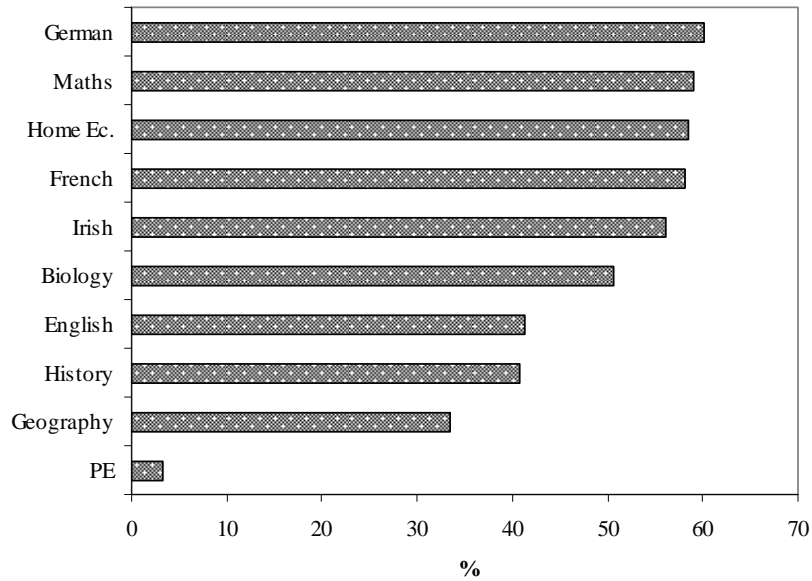
In sum, senior cycle subject take-up is influenced by gender, prior achievement, subject take-up at junior cycle and the attitudes formed to subjects at this stage. Students' perceptions of subjects in fifth year are discussed in the following section.

#### 4.4 Attitudes to Leaving Certificate Subjects

##### 4.4.1 Subject Difficulty

Over half of fifth year students find the languages, Maths and Home Economics difficult in fifth year (Figure 4.10).<sup>2</sup> Biology is found difficult by around half of the students taking it. Over a third of students find English, History and Geography difficult while only a handful of students find PE difficult.

<sup>2</sup> Because of the difference in the subjects provided within LCA, analyses in this section relate to LCE and LCVP students only.

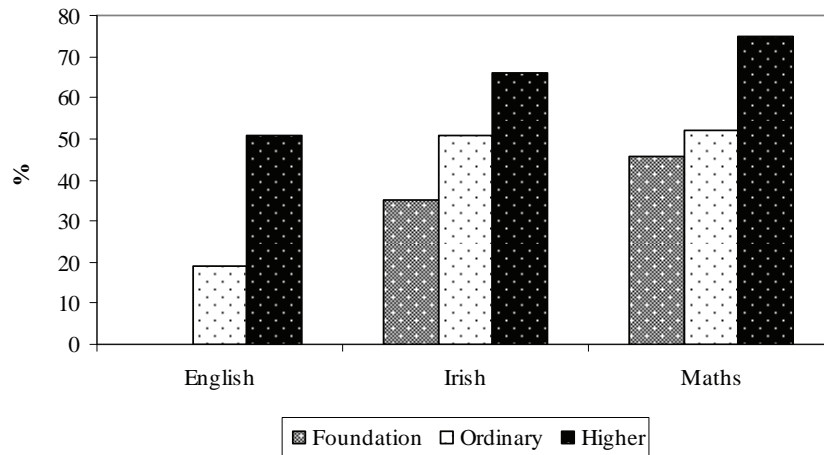
**Figure 4.10: Perceived difficulty of subjects in fifth year**

Some variation is evident across different groups of students. Female students find Maths (63 per cent v. 45 per cent), Biology (54 per cent v. 43 per cent), PE (5 per cent v. 2 per cent) and especially History (61 per cent v. 25 per cent) and Home Economics (63 per cent v. 32 per cent), more difficult than male students. Male students are more likely to find French difficult (66 per cent v. 52 per cent). The highest-performing quintile finds Maths more difficult (71 per cent) but there is little variation across the other four performance groups (52-60 per cent). Perceived English difficulty is lower for the lowest two quintiles (25 per cent and 32 per cent) than for other students (48 per cent). Irish difficulty is highest for the highest quintile (67 per cent) and lowest for the lowest quintile (49 per cent) but with little variation across the other groups (51-58 per cent). Difficulty with Biology has a clear gradient across different levels of Junior Certificate performance; 74 per cent of the lowest quintile find it difficult compared with 37 per cent of the highest quintile. A similar pattern is evident for Geography (52 per cent for the lowest quintile compared with 16 per cent for the highest quintile). Perceived Biology difficulty is greater for students from working-class (68 per cent) or

non-employed households (83 per cent) compared with those from professional backgrounds (40-41 per cent).

Perceived difficulty varies systematically by subject level, with higher level students finding English, Irish and Maths more difficult than those taking ordinary or foundation level (Figure 4.11).

**Figure 4.11: Perceived difficulty by subject level for English, Irish and Maths**



Students who have taken Transition Year are more likely to find English difficult (47 per cent v. 38 per cent) but less likely to find Home Economics difficult (42 per cent v. 70 per cent). The pattern for English is mostly related to this group's greater tendency to take the subject at higher level in fifth year.

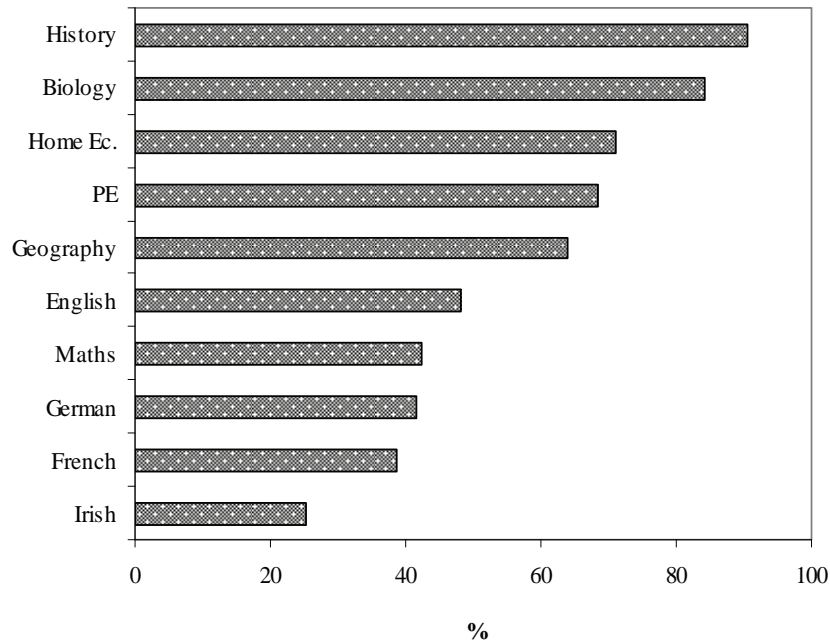
Perceived subject difficulty is not systematically related to programme satisfaction. However, students who find French difficult are more dissatisfied with the programme they are taking than other students (22 per cent v. 10 per cent). Considering schoolwork harder than in third year is more common among those who find Maths, Biology, English, History and German difficult.

#### 4.4.2 Subject Interest

Levels of student interest in subjects are higher for the 'optional' subjects, especially History, Biology and Home Economics. This is not sur-

prising given the importance of intrinsic interest in choosing a subject (see above). Interestingly, levels of interest are also high for PE, which is taken by all students. Levels of interest among fifth year students are lower for the languages (including English) as well as for Maths (Figure 4.12).

**Figure 4.12: Proportion of fifth year students who find the subject interesting**

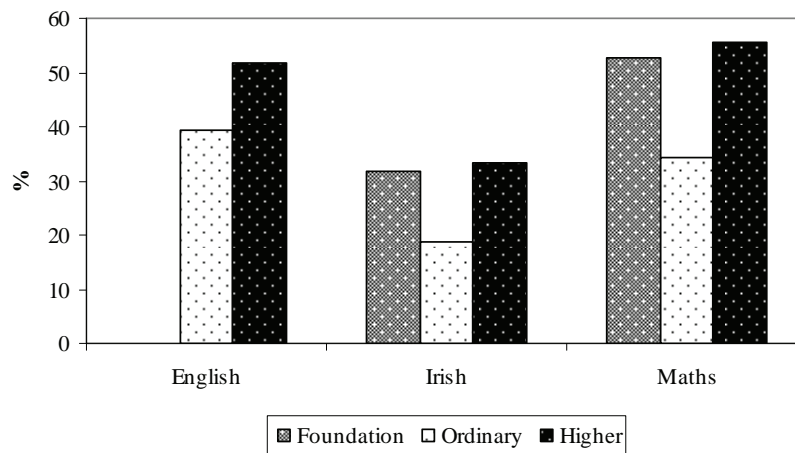


Female students report a higher level of interest than male students in Biology (87 per cent v. 79 per cent), English (55 per cent v. 41 per cent), Geography (69 per cent v. 59 per cent), French (51 per cent v. 23 per cent), German (53 per cent v. 30 per cent) and Irish (31 per cent v. 19 per cent). In contrast, female students have much lower levels of interest in PE than male students (56 per cent v. 81 per cent). Finding the specified subjects interesting does not vary systematically by social class background. Levels of interest in some subjects, including Maths, Geography, French and English, are somewhat higher among newcomer (immigrant) students. Levels of interest are higher among those with higher Junior

Certificate grades for some subjects, including Maths, Geography, German, and Irish. Students who have taken Transition Year tend to find Home Economics more interesting, and PE less interesting (61 per cent v. 74 per cent), than other students (86 per cent v. 62 per cent), although this appears to be related to the disproportionate number of female students who have taken TY rather than the effect of the programme per se.

Finding a subject interesting is significantly related to the level taken in that subject. For English, Irish and Maths, students who are taking the subject at higher level tend to report higher levels of interest than those taking ordinary level (Figure 4.13). However, perhaps surprisingly, students taking Irish and Maths at foundation level tend to report similar levels of interest to those taking the subject at higher level.

**Figure 4.13: Subject interest by level taken in English, Irish and Maths**



Students who report finding subjects, including Biology, English, Geography and French, interesting are more likely to be satisfied with the programme they are taking. There is no relationship between subject interest and perceptions of whether schoolwork is harder in fifth year.

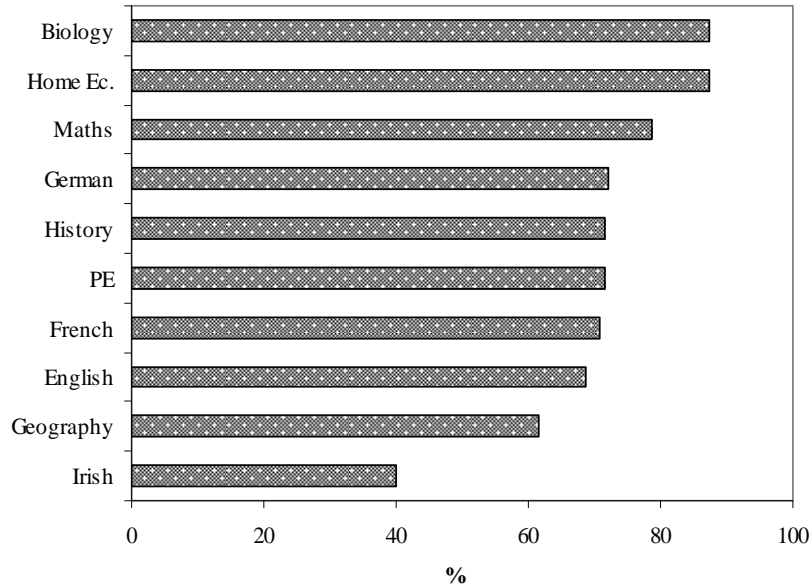
#### 4.4.3 Usefulness of Subjects

Fifth year students were most likely to consider Biology, Home Economics and Maths as useful, with over three-quarters of students considering



them useful (Figure 4.14). Over two-thirds of students find the languages (English, French and German) as well as History and PE useful. Perceived levels of usefulness are lowest for Irish with only four in ten students considering it a useful subject.

**Figure 4.14: Proportion of fifth year students finding subjects useful**



There is some variation in perceived usefulness across different groups of students. Male students are more likely to find Maths useful (82 per cent v. 76 per cent) as well as History (77 per cent v. 64 per cent) and PE (79 per cent v. 64 per cent). Female students are more likely to consider Biology (91 per cent v. 80 per cent), Home Economics (90 per cent v. 70 per cent) and French (77 per cent v. 63 per cent) useful. Newcomer students are more likely to consider English useful (82 per cent v. 67 per cent). The lowest quintile is most likely to consider English useful while perceived usefulness of Geography is highest among the two highest quintiles.

In contrast to the pattern for perceived difficulty and level of interest in English, Irish and Maths, there is no systematic relationship between perceived usefulness and the level taken in the subject. Programme satis-

fraction is somewhat higher among those who find certain subjects useful (namely, Maths, Biology and French) but there is no systematic relationship between perceived usefulness and views on schoolwork in fifth year.

#### *4.4.4 Trends in Subject Attitudes*

The longitudinal nature of the study allows us to explore the extent to which the attitudes of individual students to subjects change as they move from third year to fifth year. This section draws on survey responses in relation to English, Irish and Maths, before drawing on the student interviews to explore the perceived difficulty of other subject areas.

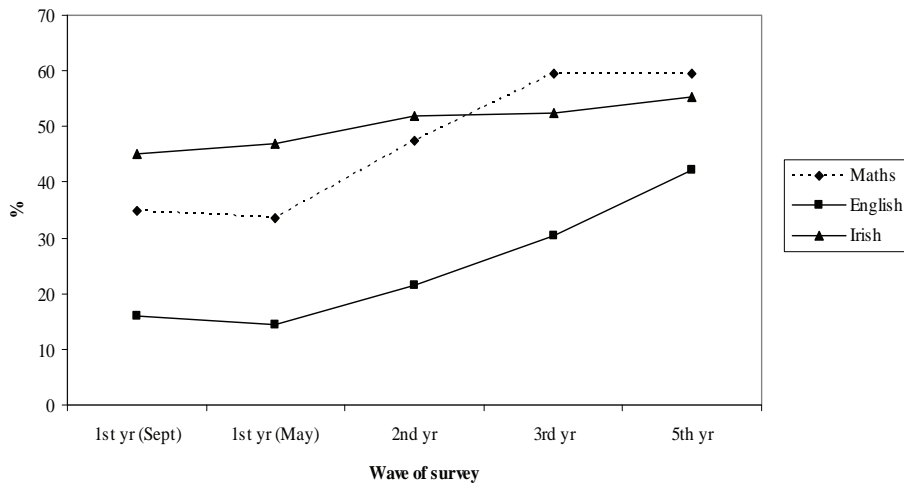
The perceived difficulty of Irish is broadly similar between third and fifth year. This applies across all groups of students, regardless of gender, having taken Transition Year and Junior Certificate performance. However, students in mixed or middle-class schools are more likely to find Irish somewhat less difficult than they had previously while those in predominantly working-class schools find it slightly more difficult.

English is seen as more difficult in fifth year than in third year, a pattern which applies for TY participants and non-participants and regardless of the social mix of the school. Female students are significantly more likely than their male counterparts to find English more difficult on moving to senior cycle. This is at least partly related to their greater tendency to take higher level English as it is higher level students that report the greatest increase in difficulty. Students who find schoolwork generally harder, and who are spending more time on homework and study, tend to be more likely to report increased difficulty in English.

The perceived difficulty of Maths is relatively stable between third and fifth year. However, those students taking higher level Maths in fifth year tend to report increased difficulty compared to those who take ordinary or foundation level Maths. Students who were in the top two quintiles of Junior Certificate performance tend to report increased difficulty, generally because they are more likely to be taking higher level Maths.

Changes in student attitudes between third and fifth year can be placed in the context of longer-term trends over the schooling career.<sup>3</sup> In first year, Irish is seen as the most difficult subject while English is seen as the least difficult subject (Figure 4.15). By Junior Certificate year, Maths has outstripped Irish in perceived difficulty. There is a slight increase over time in the perceived difficulty of Irish but a much sharper increase in the perceived difficulty of Maths and English.

**Figure 4.15: Perceived difficulty of Irish, English and Maths over time (10 schools)**



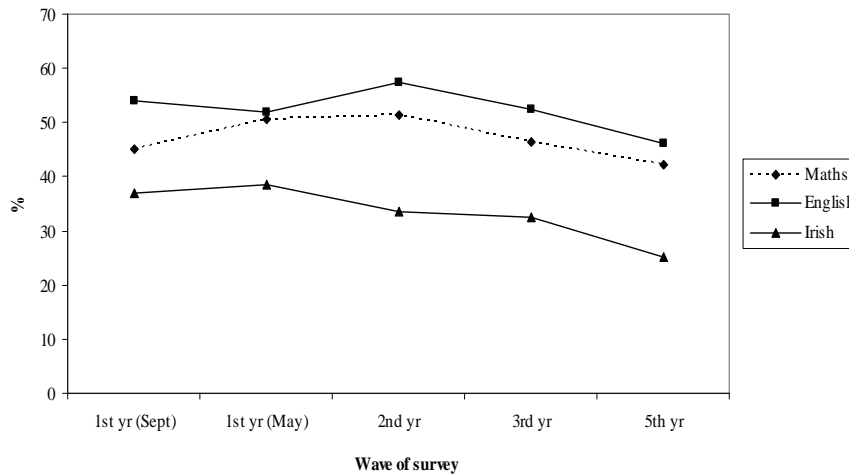
Levels of interest in Irish, English and Maths fall off somewhat between third and fifth year. The fall-off in interest in Irish is apparent for both boys and girls. Students who move directly into fifth year are more likely to experience a decline in interest in Irish than those who take Transition Year. Furthermore, the fall-off is greater among those in mixed/middle-class schools than among those in working-class schools. The decline in interest is greatest for students in the bottom two quintiles of overall Junior Certificate performance.

<sup>3</sup> These analyses relate to the ten schools who participated in the first year of the study and therefore exclude Argyle Street and Harris Street.

A declining interest in English and Maths is apparent for girls and boys, TY participants and non-participants, and across school types. Students who find Maths, English and Irish becoming more difficult in fifth year are likely to report declining interest levels in the subject.

Figure 4.16 shows levels of interest in Irish, English and Maths from first year to fifth year. There is a general decline in interest in these subjects from second year onwards. The gap in levels of interest in English and Irish has widened somewhat over the course of the schooling career.

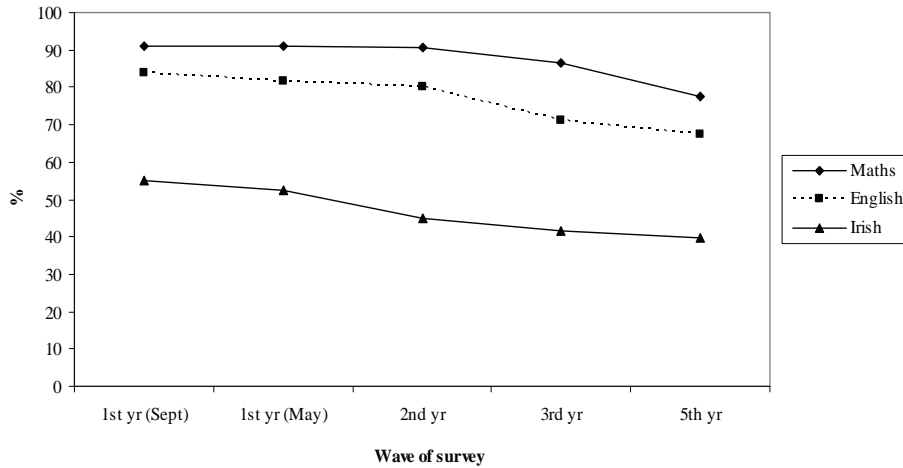
**Figure 4.16: Proportion of students who find Irish, English and Maths interesting (10 schools)**



The perceived usefulness of English and Irish does not change significantly between third and fifth year. While the proportion of students finding Maths declines from third year, around 80 per cent of students in fifth year find this subject useful. Students who see Maths as less useful as they move into fifth year are more likely to be students who achieved higher Junior Certificate grades, those who find schoolwork harder than previously, and those who are taking higher level Maths in fifth year. The perceived usefulness of Maths declines more for girls than for boys, and more for those in mixed/middle-class than for those in working-class schools. Students who find English and Irish becoming more difficult in fifth year are more likely to see the subject as less useful. Figure 4.17

shows that there is a long-term decline in the perceived usefulness of the three subjects over time. However, it should be noted that the majority of students continue to consider Maths and English to be useful subjects.

**Figure 4.17: Proportion of students who find Irish, English and Maths useful (10 schools)**



Students expressed a variety of perspectives on the senior cycle curriculum. Some were happy about the transition from junior cycle to fifth year because there were ‘less subjects and you do what you want to do’ (Argyle Street, LCE).

But I’m doing better in my choice subjects than in the core.

My core, the same, yeah.

I don’t think, well probably actually.

Because you have to do English, Irish, Maths, but like the other stuff you chose and you want to do it so you might have like an interest in it. (Harris Street, LCE, girls’ school, middle-class intake)

However, for those students without previous experience of a subject during the junior cycle, some reported difficulty in fifth year:

It's very hard like, it's not that I don't like the class, it's just very hard because I never done Science before.

Like all the girls that we're in with like has done it from first year up, so when she [the teacher] is talking like she's talking as if we already know and we don't know. Then ... she sort of separates the class and leaves us doing written work and talks to the others. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Chapter Three indicated that the majority of LCE and LCVP students found their schoolwork more difficult in fifth year than in junior cycle and reported increased homework and study demands. Many students stressed the 'amount of learning' involved in certain subjects, such as Biology and Home Economics.

Home Ec, there's so much learning in it.

...It's actually very hard.

Yeah, a lot of work in it.

...There's very little practical.

The practical and everything is pretty straightforward but then like it's just the theory, there's so much of it there, there's loads of it. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

The comments on Home Economics are consistent with the high proportion who considered the subject difficult in the student survey.

Students described a broad range of subjects as being 'harder' at senior cycle level. Aspects mentioned by many students centred on the increased demands resulting from a different mode of assessment and the need to engage more critically with course material.

Yeah, it's kind of like there's so much more [in Irish], like you've got your prose and your poetry but then in the Junior they were worth loads of marks and so you could collect loads of marks if you just learned something off. Now they're only small amount of marks and then you've got an essay, you've got all your comprehensions, then you've got like a choice, you learn debates and then you've got to learn, like there's whole new sections called stair na Gaeilge and you've got like twenty things and you've got to learn each one of

them off because either one could come up and you'd have to pick between two. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

The standard goes up and you're expected just to be able to go from Junior Cert standard to Leaving Cert. (Fig Lane, LCE/LCVP, coed school, middle-class intake)

Students also indicated that the complexity of subject material had increased, even in subject areas like English which had been seen as relatively easy at junior cycle level.

Like the English is much harder.

Harder to understand.

Then Macbeth and the language is different, you are trying to grasp what is happening, trying to keep up, the rest of the class have it done, but it's confusing. (Dawes Point, LCE, boys' school, working-class intake)

And in Junior Cert like if you spend what three years doing 'Good-night Mr. Tom' and whatever Shakespearean play you wanted to do. Where now like this year you have to do the poets and you have to do the film studies and you have to do the play and like we have a good bit of that done already like and that's three times as much as we did for Junior Cert kind of. (Belmore Street, LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

In some cases, the increased difficulty of subjects was seen as relating to poor choices or a lack of prior information about subject content.

*Interviewer:* Would you have liked to have gotten more advice about the different fifth year options, like the subjects?

Yeah, because we didn't have a clue, if they would have told us what was going to be on the subjects so we knew which ones we were kind of going to take, but we didn't have a clue ... but we didn't know, like Home Ec is just totally changed.

Like a different language.

...

It's harder than Biology.

It's really so hard, if I had known that I could have used another option that would have suited me better. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

In keeping with the patterns from the survey findings, students often found subjects more difficult where they were taking the subject at higher level.

Maths is impossible, honours maths is impossible. (Argyle Street, LCE/LCVP, coed school, mixed intake)

Or in English like from higher level English in Junior to higher level English in Leaving Cert they expect you to be ...

It's all changed.

An Oscar-winning writer for when you write your essays like.

I don't think anybody has got an A in their English. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

In contrast, some students felt that subjects, particularly at ordinary or foundation level, were too easy and lacked challenge with classes proceeding at too slow a pace.

I came down from honours English this year and when I got into it the first day I felt like a child, I just, I really did, I thought it was a joke. I actually turned round to the teacher and said 'when are we going to do the real English?' (Belmore Street, LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

I was in honours Irish last year and then dropped to ordinary ... and I was good at Irish and now I'm not like because we're not getting through any of the course. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Many students expressed difficulty with their Leaving Certificate subjects, with some indicating that they had dropped down a level when they found the subject too hard:



Irish is a lot harder.

I did honours Irish for Junior Cert but I dropped down to pass for Leaving, it's too hard.

...

It's like a whole new subject ... it's like a completely different grade or something. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

The issue of choice of subject levels within fifth year is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

#### **4.5 Conclusions**

The timing of subject choice for Leaving Certificate subjects varies across the case-study schools as does the nature of the choice process and the degree of input offered to students. As a result, students differed in the extent to which they were able to select the subjects they wanted and many reported some constraints on choice. In making their choices, students were highly reliant on advice from their parents, a pattern in keeping with that found among the same students in first year (see Smyth et al., 2004). However, formal guidance provision assumed a more prominent role at this stage. Even so, students described their subject teachers as a more important source of advice than their guidance counsellor. Students who potentially had less access to other sources of information on subjects, including lower-achieving students, newcomer students and those who had not taken Transition Year, were more reliant on the guidance counsellor than other students. Schools varied in the amount of guidance offered to students in relation to subject choice and students expressed mixed views about the value of such guidance. In particular, many students did not feel they had been sufficiently informed about the content of particular subject areas or the consequences of taking (or failing to take) certain subjects for their later career options.

Choices at senior cycle level are strongly related to student experiences at junior cycle. With the exception of business subjects and, to a lesser extent, Biology, students are very unlikely to take a subject where they have not taken a related subject for the Junior Certificate. Thus, choices made even before young people enter post-primary education

may serve to restrict the options open to them at a later stage, a pattern which highlights the importance of guidance early in the school career. Furthermore, the attitudes formed to subjects early on in junior cycle are predictive of later choices, with students much more likely to take subjects where they already had a positive experience of related Junior Certificate subjects.

Chapter Three indicated that the majority of LCE and LCVP students experience the transition to senior cycle as involving increased demands and higher standards. Many find course material and language more complex and the amount of material to be covered considerable. A change in mode of assessment from shorter questions to essay-based responses is also seen as contributing to subject workload. As might be expected, students are generally more positive about the subjects they have actively chosen, though even here too subjects such as Home Economics and Biology are seen as involving a considerable workload. Higher level subjects are seen as particularly demanding, even in the case of subjects such as English which had been seen as relatively easy at junior cycle. The process of selecting subject levels in fifth year is discussed in the following chapter.

## *Chapter Five*

### **SUBJECT LEVELS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the processes whereby students select subject levels in fifth year. Previous research has indicated a strong relationship between the levels taken at junior cycle and subject levels for the Leaving Certificate (Millar and Kelly, 1999; Smyth and Hannan, 2002). In this chapter, we explore the extent to which these processes are already at play in fifth year. The second section examines ability grouping in the case-study schools and the extent to which students feel they have a ‘choice’ as to which level to pursue. The third section of the chapter outlines the consequences of these processes in terms of the subject levels taken by different groups of students, focusing on English, Irish and Maths.

#### **5.2 Access to Subject Levels within Fifth Year**

Table 5.1 presents the system of ability grouping used for fifth years in the case-study schools. At junior cycle level, six of the schools had allocated students to their class group based on their assessed ability<sup>1</sup> (that is, used streaming or banding) and students were then taught in their higher, middle or lower stream classes for (almost) all subjects. The remaining six schools had had mixed ability base classes at junior cycle level. Of the latter schools, all used setting in Irish and Maths, with students in separate classes for higher and ordinary level depending on their

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<sup>1</sup> Schools employed a range of methods for assessing ability, including standardised literacy and numeracy tests, tests devised by the school and/or reports from the primary school (Smyth et al., 2004).

**Table 5.1: Ability grouping in fifth year in the case-study schools**

School	Ability grouping at junior cycle	Ability grouping in fifth year
Barrack Street	Mixed ability, with setting in Irish, English and Maths	Setting in Irish, English, Maths and French
Belmore Street	Mixed ability, with setting in Irish, English and Maths	Setting for Maths, Irish, English and French
Dawson Street	Mixed ability, with setting in Irish, English and Maths	Setting in Irish, English, Maths and French
Fig Lane	Mixed ability, with setting in Maths and Irish	Setting in Irish and Maths; sometimes setting in other subjects from 6 <sup>th</sup> year
Harris Street	Mixed ability, with setting in Maths and Irish	Setting in Irish, French and Maths
Wattle Street	Mixed ability, with setting in Irish, English and Maths	Setting for Irish, English and Maths
Argyle Street	Streamed/banded, with setting in Irish, English and Maths	Setting in Irish, English and Maths; sometimes setting in other subjects from 6 <sup>th</sup> year
Dawes Point	Streamed/banded	Base class based on English; setting for Irish and Maths; no higher level Irish
Dixon Street	Streamed/banded	Base class follows on from junior cycle with setting in Irish, English and Maths; no higher level Maths
Hay Street	Streamed/banded	Setting in Irish and Maths (ordinary/foundation); no higher level in these subjects
Lang Street	Streamed/banded	Setting in Irish, English and Maths
Park Street	Streamed/banded	Setting in Irish, English, Maths, French and German

ability in the particular subject; four of the schools also used setting for English. By fifth year, all but two of the schools allocated students to mixed ability base classes. The case-study schools generally used setting for Irish, English and Maths in fifth year, with students moving to different classes depending on the level they were taking in the specific subject. Three schools also used setting for French at this stage. At senior cycle level, students take fewer core subjects than at junior cycle level, with a greater degree of choice over the subjects they take (see Chapter Four). It is worth noting, therefore, that the meaning of 'base class' is more fluid at senior than at junior cycle level since students are likely to take relatively few subjects with those in their base class.

Although setting was used across all of the case-study schools, differences were evident in the extent to which students reported a 'free choice' of subject levels. In addition, schools differed in terms of whether students who took the different levels were taught separately or in one group, and the timing and flexibility with which students could change level.

In some schools, students reported little choice regarding Leaving Certificate subject levels:

*Interviewer:* Tell me about the choice of subject levels, when did you decide?

We were all put in an ordinary French class.

Yeah.

Even if you wanted to do higher, we were just put into it.

...

I'd rather do higher because you get more points if you do higher.  
(Dawson Street, LCE students, coed school, mixed intake)

*Interviewer:* And how is it decided who goes into what Maths class?

Just tell you.

They have a list and they tell you who's going to what. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

It's head wrecking because they try and tell you no, you're doing this, no like it's not [our] choice, like it's my Leaving, you know. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

In one of the case-study schools, students reported not having access to higher level Irish:

So if anyone did want to do honours Irish, they couldn't do it.

...

I would have liked to do it because it would have given me a better chance of points. Now I have to fall back on the LCVP. (Dawes Point, LCVP/LCE, boys' school, working-class intake)

In some instances, students were initially allocated to levels on the basis of prior performance and/or the subject level taken at junior cycle but students and parents could request a change in grouping. Thus, in Harris Street, a middle-class girls' school, the initial allocation was made by teachers but then students could request a change:

*Interviewer:* So how would it be decided who's in higher or ordinary English, for example?

I think the teachers tell you.

...

*Interviewer:* Let's say a teacher kind of said well I think you should do ordinary and you wanted to do higher Maths, what would happen then, do you think?

Like if you said you would work really hard at it, they'd probably say okay well if you can improve, you can. And then like there was only meant to be one honours class this year after the last exams but some people wanted to do honours so they made two. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Similarly, in Park Street, a boys' school with mixed intake, Junior Certificate grades were seen as predictive of subject level but some flexibility was available if students wanted to take subjects at higher level:

If you got like a C you could stay in honours and if you got like a D they'd say go down, you're not able for it.

*Interviewer:* And was that your subject teacher or like your Irish teacher would say it to you?

Yeah, they'd say you're probably not able for this but you can try it.

You could decide to stay up as well like, if you wanted to, if you got a D in the Junior Cert and wanted to stay up you could. (Park Street, LCE, boys' school, mixed intake)

For some students, their level was determined by their Junior Certificate results and/or the level they had previously taken:

You kept going whatever you'd done for Junior. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Like if you done foundation Maths in the Junior Cert you do foundation level now. (Dawes Point, LCE, boys' school, working-class intake)

In contrast, students in other schools felt that they had more choice over the levels selected, albeit with some teacher input into the process:

We had the choice, teachers like advised us which way to go. (Lang Street, LCE, boys' school, working-class intake)

*Interviewer:* And how is it decided who does honours and pass?

Teachers advise you on what they think but you pick yourself. (Belmore Street, LCVP/LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

However, students often framed flexibility of movement in terms of the ability to move 'down' a level rather than 'upwards':<sup>2</sup>

If you wanted to drop, you just dropped. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

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<sup>2</sup> The survey data indicate that no students moved 'upwards' in Maths while only a handful of students moved up a level in English or Irish. The students involved are too few to be analysed separately.

You could [drop down] but you couldn't go up, I don't think you could go from ordinary to higher, I don't think you could do that. (Belmore Street, LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

For some, the decision to drop down was assisted by the teacher, who provided advice based on their mid-year exam results:

Like at Christmas, after the Christmas tests most people doing higher level Maths had to drop down because it was just too hard to do it. And the teacher would say just drop down. A lot of people did. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

In other cases, the school's approach seemed to be designed to retain as many students as possible within higher level classes:

*Interviewer:* And if you wanted to drop down, would the teacher say anything?

You have to get written permission from your parents.

They'll [the teachers will] try to persuade you to stay at it like if they think you're able for it.

Yeah but if they know that like you're weak at the subject then it would be like ok, you're grand. (Belmore Street, LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

Chapter Four indicated that many students found subjects more difficult in fifth year than they had in their Junior Certificate year, especially if they were taking subjects at higher level. Finding a subject difficult emerged as a common motivation for dropping levels between junior and senior cycle:

I'm doing pass English because I just could not do honours. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

I found Irish in the Junior Cert really hard and I hated it every day but now I'm gone into pass this year and it's a lot easier. (Fig Lane, LCE/LCVP, coed school, middle-class intake)

The guidance received by students making the transition to senior cycle generally centred on the choice of programmes and/or subjects (see



Chapters Three and Four). However, some students reported that they had received advice on subject levels, generally in the form of informal advice from their subject teacher rather than formal advice from the guidance counsellor (see above). In Harris Street, a middle-class girls' school, however, some students reported being discouraged from taking higher level Maths unless they 'needed' it for further education or employment:

For Maths, honours level like, we got a big talk like unless you really want to do engineering or something, it's not really recommended because you know you're gonna stress yourself out over it and just concentrate on Maths and not anything else. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

It is interesting in this case that the perceived difficulty of higher level Leaving Certificate Maths on the part of school personnel served to influence student choices, in contrast to the situation for other subjects (such as Irish) where students' own experience of the subject played a stronger role in shaping their choices.

Chapters Three and Four examined the role of guidance in assisting student choice of programmes and subjects, indicating how many students were unaware of the longer term implications of the decisions they had made. Similarly, a number of students felt they had been largely unaware of the consequences of choosing particular subject levels for their longer term plans:

I was in honours last year for Irish and basically because I was lazy I dropped down to pass this year and I totally regret it.

Because you can't go up, you can't go up and if you think about it right, I found out that an A in pass is 60 points and a D in honours is 60 points.

...

Yeah, so if you're absolutely crap at Irish but you're doing honours and you get a C, which you may think is crap, a C2 even, that is the equivalent of even more than an A [in ordinary level] so I was totally oblivious to this, do you know what I mean, I don't know, I blame

teachers for not telling us this, do you know what I mean. (Belmore Street, LCVP/LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

One student also reported that he had been allocated to ordinary level because he had been in a streamed class at junior cycle and regretted the long-term impact on his choices at senior cycle:

I was allowed do everything else higher level except for English, Irish, Maths because I was in the ordinary level classes [at junior cycle]. But ... you see the ordinary level Maths now is higher level Maths at Junior Cert and I find that very easy and I was saying Jesus if I would have done it last year, I could have got an honour in higher level Maths but we were never given the option to do it like. So that was kind of disappointing. (Dawes Point, LCE, boys' school, working-class intake)

While some appreciated the emphasis on matching the level to the student's capabilities, others felt that the teacher's role was to ensure that the student reached his or her full potential, with additional support provided if necessary:

If you want to do something like, if you want to do higher and you didn't do that well in your Junior, they should help you to try and do that because you need your points to go on to college.

Maybe if you did ordinary level at Junior Cert and you really wanted to do higher level then maybe they should help you to try reach your potential to be able to maybe do higher level. (Dawson Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Furthermore, some students reported a lack of knowledge as to what the standard of particular classes would be if they 'dropped down' and were not satisfied with the new class to which they were assigned (see also Chapter Four):

I totally regret going into pass Irish ... At the start they were doing this story in Irish and I thought it was so hard and when we went to do homework, so I went down to pass and then when you go into the pass class and they were doing the same bloody story. (Belmore Street, LCVP/LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

In sum, students across the case-study schools reported different levels of choice regarding the subject levels they selected. While some students reported 'free choice', in many instances the level taken at junior cycle along with prior performance formed the context within which students could make decisions. The accounts of key personnel in the case-study schools also indicated variation in the approach taken. In keeping with the student reports, staff in Belmore Street encouraged as many students as possible to take subjects at higher level, given the difficulty in subsequently reversing a decision to drop 'down':

They won't be going up so we would encourage them to go higher level with everything and let them come down rather than, they won't go the other way about it, they can't. (Belmore Street, staff, girls' school, mixed intake)

This mirrored the approach the school had taken at junior cycle, meaning that girls in Belmore Street, a mixed intake school, took around as many Junior Certificate subjects at higher level as students attending more middle-class schools. In Harris Street, a middle-class girls' school where TY was compulsory, having taken Transition Year was seen as facilitating a greater take-up of subjects at higher level:

I think a lot of them will attempt to try the higher level in their options ... and we would encourage them to try and pick subjects that they feel they have an interest in and a strength in, if you like, and I think yeah a lot of them would be keen to do a higher level, especially when they start fifth year. (Harris Street, staff, girls' school, middle-class intake)

In other cases, school staff emphasised the importance of the level taken at junior cycle, albeit with some flexibility for certain students:

Well, a minimum you would have to have done higher level anyway usually or have got an A in the ordinary level, that tends to be [how] they operate. But I think to be fair to the school ... I had somebody in recently in fifth year now and they were ordinary level now but they had been doing well in English, we're hoping to get that student into a higher level class in September because ... they have beaten the system. (Argyle Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

*Interviewer:* And how is it decided who goes into the honours class?

That's on the basis of their exam results, on the basis of their progress during the year and the opinion of the teacher. Because sometimes people may not have done well on the day of the exam so if the teacher feels that you know they are honours material we go in line with the teacher's view. (Wattle Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

Low student expectations were also seen as a factor limiting the number of students taking higher level subjects in one working-class school:

*Interviewer:* How is it decided which students are taking higher or ordinary level?

Their results at Junior Cert and the teacher that would have had them at Junior Cert would have a big input into it and infrequently we would have students that are looking to go up a level. But more often it's to go down a level because they feel they don't have the ability. But in reality they do have the ability but they just don't have the work ethic and they don't have the history of preparing properly for exams. (Dixon Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

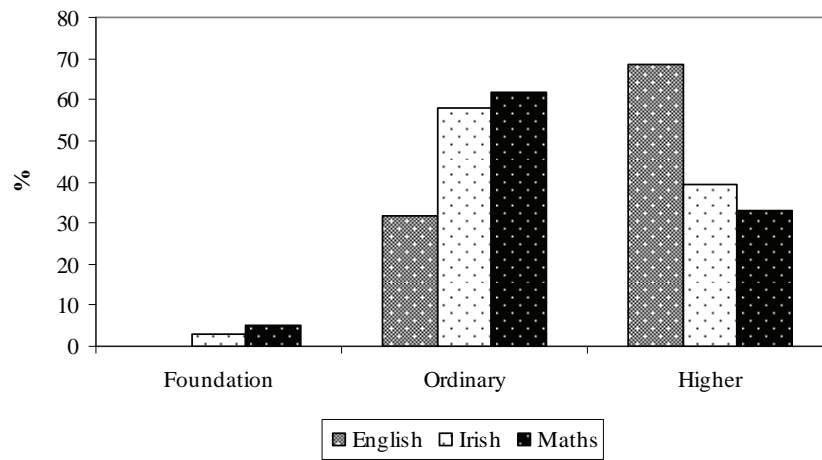
For the most part, the choice of subject levels reflects the interaction between school policy, teacher expectations and student preferences. The following section examines the consequences of this process in terms of the proportion of students taking higher level subjects in fifth year.

### **5.3 Subject Level Taken in English, Irish and Maths**

Optional subjects are generally taught in mixed ability classes in fifth year with some schools providing set classes for certain subjects in sixth year (see Table 5.1). For this reason, this section focuses on the proportion of students taking different levels for Irish, English and Maths. A further phase of the study will allow us to examine the take-up of higher level subjects in the Leaving Certificate exam. The majority of fifth year students in the case-study schools are taking English at higher level (Figure 5.1). However, for Irish and Maths, taking ordinary level is more common than taking higher level. Only a very small proportion of stu-

dents are taking Irish or Maths at foundation level at this stage in senior cycle (that is, mid-way through fifth year).

**Figure 5.1: Subject levels for English, Irish and Maths in fifth year**

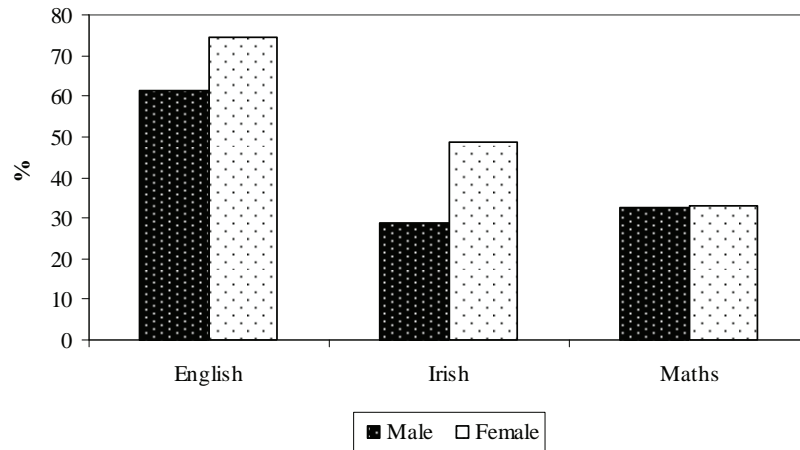


### 5.3.1 Subject Level Take-up and Student Characteristics

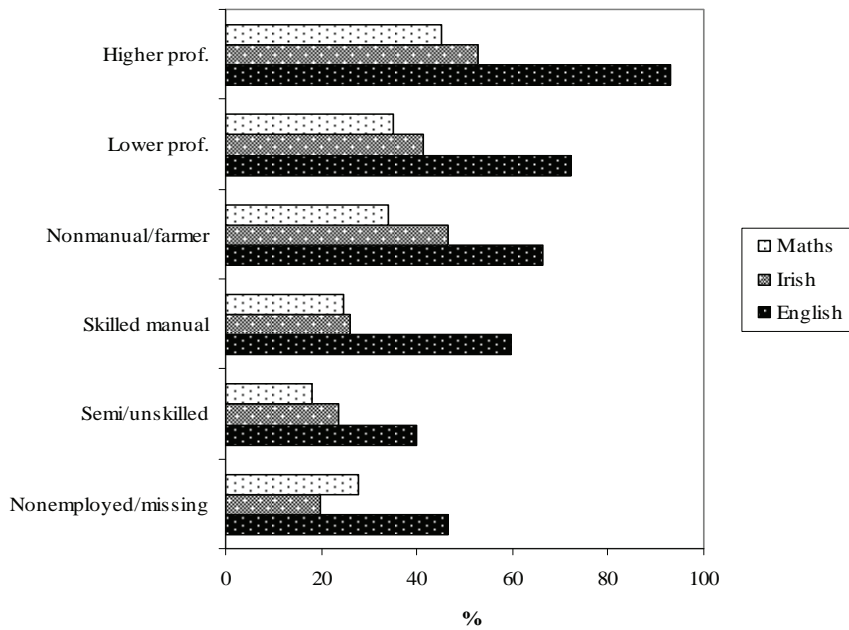
Subject level take-up is found to vary across different groups of students. Clear gender differences are evident in relation to English and Irish, with female students much more likely than their male counterparts to take the subjects at higher level (Figure 5.2). Similar proportions of boys and girls are found to take higher level Maths.

There is a clear social class gradient in the take-up of higher level subjects. Almost all students from higher professional backgrounds take higher level English compared with four in ten of those from semi/unskilled manual backgrounds (Figure 5.3). In general, higher professional groups are more than twice as likely to take higher level as the semi/unskilled manual groups; the difference is more marked for Maths (with a ratio of 2.5) than for English and Irish (with ratios of 2.3 and 2.2 respectively).

**Figure 5.2: Higher level take-up by gender**



**Figure 5.3: Higher level take-up by social class background**



Variation is also evident across different ethnic groups, although these results should be interpreted with caution due to the relatively small numbers involved. Newcomer (immigrant) students are less likely to take higher level English (53 per cent compared with 70 per cent) but do not

differ markedly from Irish students in relation to Maths level take-up. In addition, students from a Traveller background are less likely to take higher level Irish than those from the settled community (24 per cent compared with 40 per cent).

### 5.3.2 Subject Level Take-up and Educational History

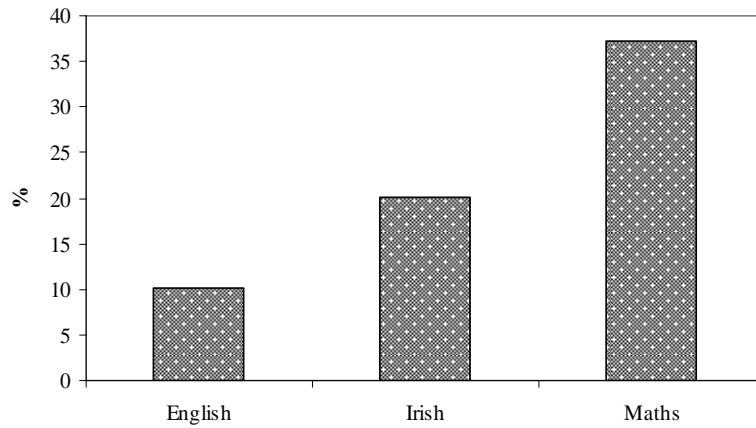
Access to subject levels at senior cycle is likely to be strongly related to the subject levels taken for the Junior Certificate exam. This may occur because of formal specifications by the school (see above) but also because a student may be reluctant to change levels before ‘sampling’ the subject in question. In general, students who took higher level for the Junior Certificate tend to keep on higher level in fifth year. However, the extent to which they do so varies across subjects: English has the highest retention rate with only ten per cent of higher level students dropping levels while this is the case for a fifth of Irish students (Figure 5.4). A marked contrast is evident with Maths, where four in ten students drop from higher level between third and fifth year; this pattern is in keeping with the perceived difficulty of higher level Maths outlined in Chapter Four. Only a handful of students moved upwards from ordinary to higher level or downwards from ordinary to foundation level.<sup>3</sup>

Access to subject levels is also likely to be strongly determined by prior performance. Students were divided into five groups (quintiles) on the basis of their overall Junior Certificate grades across all exam subjects and the proportion taking higher level compared across these groups. As might be expected, students who achieved higher grades in the Junior Certificate exam are much more likely to go on to take higher level subjects in fifth year. A strong contrast is evident between English and the other subjects; even students with relatively low exam scores take English at higher level but they only very rarely take Irish or Maths at higher level (Figure 5.5). The highest quintile group is 5.5 times more likely to take English at higher level than the lowest quintile group. However, for Irish, this ratio is 22 and for Maths 88, indicating that higher level Maths tends to attract only students with very high grades to begin with.

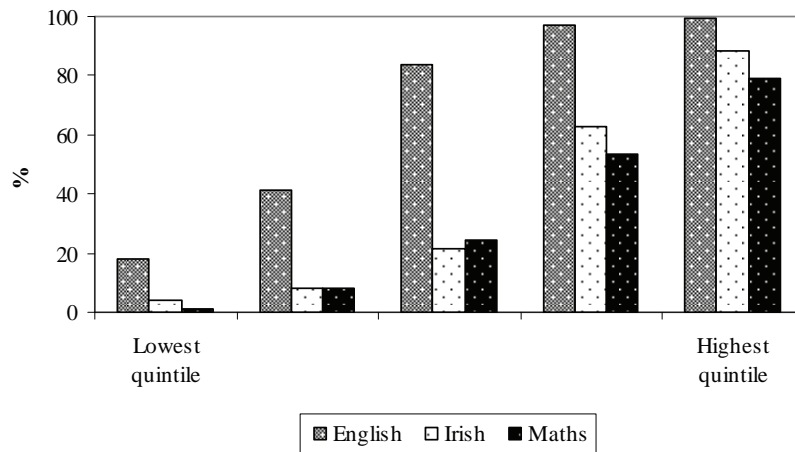
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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that a number of students who had taken foundation level subjects had dropped out of school by this stage in fifth year.

**Figure 5.4: Proportion who took higher level at JC but dropped higher level in fifth year**



**Figure 5.5: Higher level take-up by Junior Certificate performance**



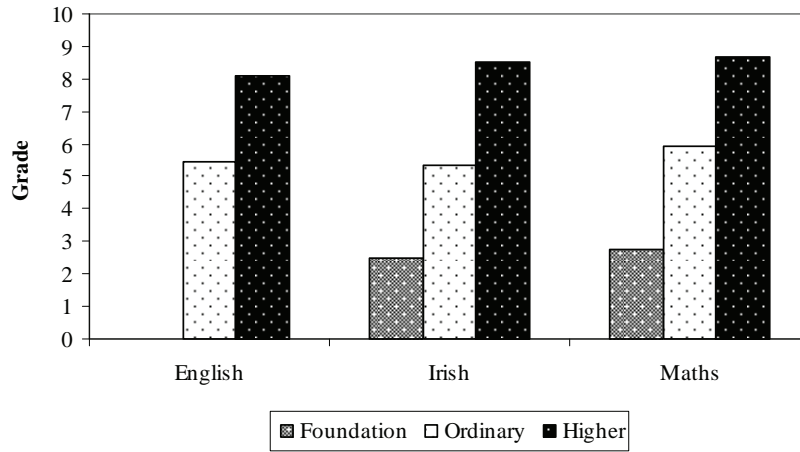
Take-up is, of course, also related to the grades achieved in the specific subjects. Students who take higher level had generally received higher grades than those who take ordinary level who, in turn, achieved higher grades than those taking foundation level (Figure 5.6). Thus, those taking ordinary level English had received 5.5 grade points in Junior Certificate English while those taking higher level had received an average of 8.1 grade points (out of a maximum of 10 grade points).



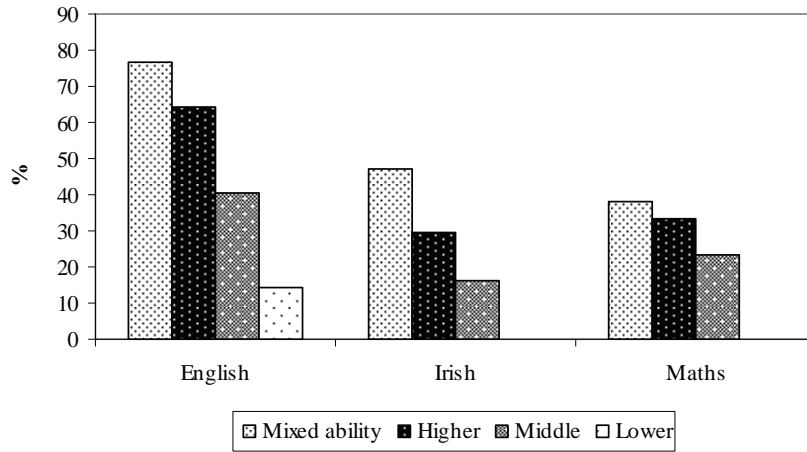
Class grouping during junior cycle strongly influenced Junior Certificate subject levels (see Smyth et al., 2007) and continues to have an effect on the level at which students take subjects at senior cycle. Take-up of higher level subjects is highest among those who had been in mixed ability base classes at junior cycle, reflecting at least in part the social profile of mixed ability schools. Within streamed schools, take-up of higher level subjects at senior cycle is strongly structured by prior ability group, with the highest take-up found among those who had been in higher stream classes and the lowest take-up found among those who had been in lower stream classes (Figure 5.7). In fact, none of those who had been in a lower stream class for junior cycle take Irish or Maths at higher level in fifth year. The long-term effect of ability grouping is likely to be mediated by differential access to subject levels at junior cycle as well as underperformance among lower stream classes within the Junior Certificate exam.

There is considerable variation in the take-up of higher level subjects across the case-study schools. The vast majority of students in Fig Lane and Harris Street, both middle-class schools, take higher level English while this is the case for only a minority of students in three of the working-class schools, Hay Street, Barrack Street and Dawes Point. Take-up of higher level Irish is greatest in Belmore Street, Dawson Street, Fig Lane and Harris Street, all schools with mixed or middle-class intakes. In contrast, fewer than ten per cent of students in Barrack Street, Dawes Point, Hay Street or Dixon Street, all working-class schools, are taking Irish at higher level. Nineteen per cent of the students in Dawes Point are taking foundation Irish while none of the students in four schools (Harris Street, Park Street, Fig Lane and Wattle Street) do so. Take-up of higher level Maths is greatest in Belmore Street, Park Street Fig Lane and Harris Street, all mixed/middle-class schools; none of the students in two working-class schools, Dixon Street and Hay Street, take higher level Maths. Foundation Maths is taken by 45 per cent of students in Dixon Street but by none of the students in six mixed/middle-class schools (Dawson Street, Argyle Street, Park Street, Fig Lane, Belmore Street and Wattle Street).

**Figure 5.6: Subject level by grades received in the specific subject**



**Figure 5.7: Higher level take-up by ability group in junior cycle**

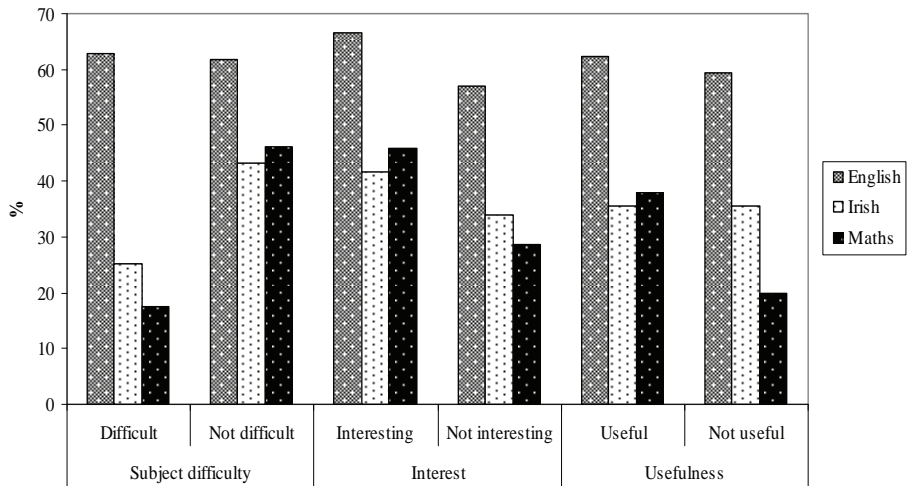


Students who had taken Transition Year were more likely than non-participants to take higher level English (80 per cent v. 62 per cent), Irish (43 per cent v. 37 per cent) and Maths (41 per cent v. 28 per cent). Analyses below explore the extent to which this reflects the profile of students taking Transition Year or the effect of participation in the programme.

5.3.3 Subject Level Take-up and Attitudes to Subjects at Junior Cycle

The longitudinal nature of the data means that we can explore the extent to which the subject level taken is influenced by attitudes to that subject at junior cycle level. Figure 5.8 presents the proportion of students taking Irish, English and Maths at higher level according to whether students viewed those subjects as difficult, interesting or useful in first year. First year attitudes are presented because by second and third year, student attitudes will also reflect the level they have already chosen in a particular subject. Students who found English interesting in first year are somewhat more likely to go on to take the subject at higher level in fifth year. However, taking higher level English is not related to seeing it as difficult or useful. In contrast, Irish and Maths level are more strongly related to perceived difficulty in first year. Thus, for example, only 17 per cent of those who found Maths difficult in first year went on to take it at higher level in fifth year compared with 46 per cent of those who did not find it difficult. Those who find Maths or Irish interesting in first year are more likely to go on to take that subject at higher level. Furthermore, seeing Maths as a useful subject is associated with higher level take-up while this is not the case for Irish.

**Figure 5.8: Take-up of subjects at higher level by attitudes to subjects in first year**



#### *5.3.4 Explaining Subject Level Take-up*

Analyses so far have explored the association between subject level take-up and individual factors. It is worth looking at the simultaneous influence of a number of factors on level take-up to assess the processes at work. We do this by using a series of multilevel models to take account of the clustering of students within schools. The logistic regression models presented contrast taking higher level in the specific subject with taking ordinary (or foundation) level. As in previous analyses, significant positive coefficients indicate that the characteristic is associated with increased chances of taking higher level while significant negative coefficients show the factor is linked to reduced chances of taking higher level.

Table 5.2 presents the analyses for English. Model 1 examines the effects of gender, social class background and ability group at junior cycle on higher level take-up. There is a clear social class gradient in take-up, with the highest take-up found among the professional groups. Female students are also more likely to take higher level English than their male peers, in keeping with the descriptive analyses presented above. Students who had been allocated to a higher stream class are more likely, and those in middle or lower streams less likely, to take higher level English than those in mixed ability base classes. The school-level variance term indicates that schools differ significantly in the proportion of students taking higher level English, even taking account of the gender and social class profile of the student body. Model 2 adds in the social class composition of the school; students attending working-class schools are much less likely to take higher level English than those in mixed or middle-class schools, even taking account of individual social class background. Thus, a working-class student attending a mixed school will be more likely to take higher level English than one with the same characteristics who attends a working-class school.

**Table 5.2: Multilevel logistic regression model of factors predicting take-up of higher level as opposed to ordinary level English (n=692)**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	-0.823	-0.253	-2.411	-3.043
Female	0.474*	0.528*	-0.257	-0.281
Social class background:				
Higher professional	2.081***	2.446***	2.621***	2.587***
Lower professional	1.055**	1.166**	1.138 <sup>^</sup>	1.098 <sup>^</sup>
Non-manual	0.746*	0.810*	0.548	0.518
Skilled manual	0.720 <sup>^</sup>	0.816*	-0.029	-0.103
Farmer	0.876 <sup>^</sup>	0.904 <sup>^</sup>	0.214	0.210
Non-employed (Contrast: semi/unskilled manual)	0.927 <sup>^</sup>	1.115 <sup>^</sup>	1.974 <sup>^</sup>	1.753
Base class at junior cycle:				
Higher stream	1.212*	2.011***	0.363	0.562
Middle/lower stream (Contrast: mixed ability)	-1.110*	-0.883 <sup>^</sup>	-0.857	-0.751
Working-class school		-2.153***	0.580	0.595
Took JC higher level			3.792***	4.044***
JC English grade (centred on mean)			0.706***	0.681***
Took Transition Year				1.157**
School-level variance	1.174*	0.525 <sup>^</sup>	1.026 <sup>^</sup>	0.704

Note: \*\*\* p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \* p<.05, <sup>^</sup> p<.10.

Model 3 (Table 5.3) shows that students who took higher level English at junior cycle and those who achieved higher English grades in the Junior Certificate exam are, not surprisingly, much more likely to take higher level in fifth year than other students. It now becomes clear that the gender gap in favour of females is due to the greater tendency of girls to take higher level English and achieve higher grades at junior cycle. Much of the social class difference is similarly accounted for by prior take-up and

performance; however, students from professional backgrounds remain more likely to take higher level English than other students of similar achievement levels. Model 4 indicates that students who have taken Transition Year are more likely than non-participants to take higher level English, all else being equal.

Table 5.3 presents the results of similar analyses regarding the take-up of higher level Irish. As with English, female students and those from professional backgrounds are more likely to take higher level Irish (Model 1); an interesting difference is that students from farm households are also more likely to take higher level Irish, perhaps reflecting regional variation in attitudes to, and engagement with, the language. Students who were allocated to a higher stream class at junior cycle are more likely than others to take higher level Irish. Students attending working-class schools are less likely to take higher level Irish than those in other schools, and the gap is somewhat greater than was the case for English (Model 2). Taking higher level Irish at junior cycle and achieving good grades in it are strongly associated with take-up of higher level in fifth year (Model 3). Unlike English, taking Transition Year does not appear to make a difference to level take-up in Irish.

In contrast to the pattern for English and Irish, no gender differences are apparent in the take-up of higher level Maths. Once again, social class variation is apparent, with greater take-up among professional and farming groups (Model 1). Students in higher stream classes are more likely to take higher level Maths, because of their greater take-up of higher level at junior cycle (contrast Models 2 and 3). Students attending working-class schools are less likely to take higher level Maths, again because of their prior take-up and performance. Take-up of higher level Maths is greater among those who took higher level at junior cycle and achieved a good Junior Certificate Maths grade (Model 3). No significant differences are found in Maths take-up between TY participants and non-participants are apparent, once other characteristics of the two groups are taken into account (Model 4).

**Table 5.3: Multiple logistic regression model of factors predicting take-up of higher level as opposed to ordinary/foundation level Irish (n=636)**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	-2.022	-1.390	-5.468	-5.045
Female	0.785**	0.714***	0.709 <sup>^</sup>	0.787 <sup>^</sup>
Social class background:				
Higher professional	1.212**	1.064*	0.630	0.658
Lower professional	0.869*	0.758 <sup>^</sup>	0.690	0.713
Non-manual	0.687	0.585	0.685	0.710
Skilled manual	0.244	0.198	0.614	0.645
Farmer	1.574**	1.543**	1.611 <sup>^</sup>	1.602 <sup>^</sup>
Non-employed (Contrast: semi/unskilled manual)	0.542	0.695	1.068	1.107
Base class at junior cycle:				
Higher stream	0.828 <sup>^</sup>	1.983***	1.085	1.018
Middle/lower stream (Contrast: mixed ability)	-0.436	-0.126	-1.184*	-1.280*
Working-class school		-3.607***	-1.138	-1.084
Took JC higher level JC Irish grade (centred on mean)			4.640*** 0.867***	4.633*** 0.878***
Took Transition Year				-0.212
School-level variance	0.616*	0.001	0	0

Note: \*\*\* p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \* p<.05, <sup>^</sup> p<.10.

In sum, the strongest influences on taking higher level in English, Irish and Maths at senior cycle relate to prior choices at, and performance within, junior cycle. Those from middle-class backgrounds tend to access higher level Irish and Maths at senior cycle because of their greater tendency to take higher level at junior cycle and their higher grades (Tables 5.3 and 5.4). However, for English, social class background continues to have a direct effect; middle-class students take higher level Eng-

lish in greater numbers than students with similar educational histories from other social classes (Table 5.2, model 4). Streaming at junior cycle has a long-term impact because it channels students into particular subject levels at an early stage. Overall, students in working-class schools are much less likely to take higher level subjects in fifth year than those in mixed or middle-class schools, which reflects the lower take-up of, and performance in, related subjects at junior cycle level.

**Table 5.4: Multiple logistic regression model of factors predicting take-up of higher level as opposed to ordinary/foundation level Maths (n=706)**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	-1.785	-1.385	-3.216	-3.337
Female	-0.298	-0.239	-0.263	-0.393
Social class background:				
Higher professional	1.324**	1.364**	-0.652	-0.662
Lower professional	0.979*	1.030*	-0.612	-0.622
Non-manual	0.647	0.665	-1.055	-1.060
Skilled manual	0.490	0.542	-1.246	-1.269
Farmer	1.163*	1.220	-0.006	-0.001
Non-employed (Contrast: semi/unskilled manual)	0.586	0.714	-1.365	-1.514
Base class at junior cycle:				
Higher stream	0.950*	1.864***	0.645	0.741
Middle/lower stream (Contrast: mixed ability)	-0.453	0.003	0.789	0.893
Working-class school		-2.431***	-0.002	-0.044
Took JC higher level JC Maths grade (centred on mean)			2.770*** 1.137***	2.701*** 1.137***
Took Transition Year				0.523
School-level variance	0.872*	0.277 <sup>△</sup>	0.315	0.354



Note: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ ,  $\Delta$   $p < .10$ .

## 5.4 Conclusions

The case-study schools are found to differ in the degree, timing and flexibility of choice of subject levels available to fifth year students. In some schools, the allocation of students to particular levels is strongly related to the level they took at junior cycle as well as their performance in that subject. In other cases, student choice of level is largely 'up to themselves'.

In keeping with previous research (Millar and Kelly, 1999; Smyth and Hannan, 2002), subject level take-up at senior cycle is the culmination of a much longer-term process whereby students are channelled into particular subject levels as they move through junior cycle. Only a miniscule number of students move 'upwards' from ordinary to higher level or from foundation to ordinary level over the transition to senior cycle. Students are much more likely to 'drop' levels, with a considerable proportion of students moving from higher to ordinary level Maths at this stage.

The tendency of male students, working-class students and those in working-class schools to take ordinary or foundation level in Irish, English and Maths at senior cycle is found to be primarily related to their having taken these levels at junior cycle and/or to their lower grades in the Junior Certificate exam. Thus, gender and social differentiation in subject level at senior cycle largely reflects prior decisions and processes occurring within the junior cycle. One of these processes relates to the nature of ability grouping within junior cycle; students who were allocated to middle or lower stream classes are highly unlikely to access higher level English, Irish or Maths when they reach fifth year. The attitudes formed in relation to subjects, even as early as first year, are influential, with the perceived difficulty of Irish and Maths forming a barrier to later take-up. Taking Transition Year appears to enhance the likelihood of taking higher level English in fifth year, a process that is not apparent in relation to Irish or Maths. It may be that the use of communicative skills as part of project work across a range of subject areas within Transition Year enhances students' capacity to engage with higher level coursework in English.

## *Chapter Six*

# **PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL AND THE TRANSITION TO SENIOR CYCLE**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the transition to senior cycle and its implications for students' engagement with school life. The first section presents the views of key personnel, including principals, guidance counsellors, year heads and class tutors, on the transition to senior cycle, highlighting the perceived difficulties students experience at this stage of their school year. The following sections explore the extent to which student attitudes to school actually change over the course of transition to senior cycle. These sections focus on the extent to which students like school and their teachers, their academic self-image (that is, how they view their own abilities), and the nature of their relations with teachers and other students in the school.

### **6.2 Key Personnel Views on the Transition to Senior Cycle**

The majority (over two-thirds) of the key personnel interviewed felt that students experienced some difficulties in making the transition to senior cycle. The most frequently mentioned difficulty was the gap in standards and demands between junior and senior cycle.

They [teachers] would feel that there is a lot more expected of the students in senior cycle than there is at junior cycle, that it's very well structured, they can sort of pass through the exams fairly easily at junior cycle, and in terms of preparing them for the Leaving Cert, unless they really are working consistently and applying themselves

that they're going to find it very difficult to work through the work. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

I think it takes them ... some students, a certain amount of time to adjust to Leaving Cert standard work and to the length of answers you need, to the amount of work that you have to put into it yourself. I think that can be a shock to them and ... some of them will get into that quickly, others it takes longer ... You know even things like note taking at Leaving Cert, all that kind of stuff, it takes them longer to get that organised. (Harris Street, staff, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Adjusting to the standards expected of Leaving Certificate students was seen as more difficult for those students who had taken subjects at ordinary or foundation level for the Junior Certificate:

I think in general every year we have the problem of the student who did ordinary level subjects at Junior Cert trying to adapt to an ordinary level Leaving Cert. ... Like ordinary level Irish ... ordinary level Irish leading up to ordinary level Leaving Cert Irish, oh no, no, no, no comparison at all. It's very tough for them to make that jump because at Junior Cert ... they write a postcard and they write a little story, twelve sentences and they do a few comprehension, tick a few boxes, it's all nice. And then at Leaving Cert they come in and the first thing is the poetry, you know it's like a whole different level. They do get there eventually but I think they find it, I think fifth year is very tough, just to make that jump is huge. (Dixon Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

Well there's a big jump, there's a huge jump like you know, there's a huge jump. I had a crowd now last year, a lot of them didn't come back but we were doing foundation English for the Junior Cert, there's no foundation English for the Leaving Certs and you're talking about ... several books and plays and things like that, they're doing Macbeth like you know, and you've comparative then. (Hay Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

Staff felt that (some) students found it difficult to adjust to the increased demands within fifth year.

There's quite a jump, yeah, because post-Junior Cert there's less academic emphasis [in Transition Year] and then it's ratcheted up

again in fifth year and some children can find that difficult to adjust to. (Lang Street, staff, boys' school, working-class intake)

Furthermore, senior cycle was seen as requiring a greater investment in work and study than had been the case at junior cycle. This was seen as particularly the case for students who had 'coasted', relying on their 'natural ability' to do well in the Junior Certificate exam.

There are students who do find the jump from third year to fifth year difficult in terms of the workload. Fifth year, if you're applying yourself there's a lot of work to be done, you know, and that can be a shock to the system. Particularly students who may be quite bright, have high levels of ability and didn't maybe have to study extremely hard for their Junior Cert. They find at senior cycle that this natural ability isn't enough to carry them through, that the work has to actually be put in as well and that can be a shock to the system. (Argyle Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

Many considered that the Junior Certificate examination had become comparatively easy, with the result that students had unrealistic expectations of the standards expected of them in senior cycle:

An awful step up, now, and I honestly think ... that marks and grades are thrown at them in Junior Cert and it gives them an awful false sense when they go in to [senior cycle]. ... They're expecting the same sort of thing in their Leaving Cert and there's no way do they come near it. I know ... from the Junior Cert Science ... the grades that some of them get you'd wonder how they get them, you know, I think they come along and they're running in, 'I got an A in this' and they're expecting an A then in the Leaving Cert, there's no way they'll make it like, you know. ... They're in for a rude awakening. You know ... there is a huge step up. (Hay Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

There's no real challenge of Junior Cert anymore. Now, the difficulty is that the gap, as far as I see it, between the demands of Junior Cert and Leaving Cert have changed completely. So there's a big, big chasm there. So like a lot of the Junior Cert programme, as I would consider let's say, I always called it a sound bite work. ... You could get an A in Geography at Junior Cert level with the minimum of effort, you know. Some of the things are just tick boxes like that, Science is a bit like that. And so it's trying to convince the

student that there's a significant gap between the demands what they left behind you know. ... Inevitably Leaving Cert, there is far more writing required. (Dawes Point, staff, boys' school, working-class intake)

In particular, a number of staff felt that modes of assessment became more rigorous at senior cycle level, requiring more systematic engagement with subjects through essays:

If you take, for example, just one example like History, like [Junior Certificate] History, you have a lot of tick boxes and a lot of paragraphs and then suddenly you have Leaving Cert History then there's five English essays, you know what I mean. There's a huge jump from ticking boxes about crannogs and to going into writing an actual essay about ... and looking at a whole platter of themes and, other things that are happening and reading around it. So there's a massive gap there, you know what I mean. (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake)

Students were seen as differing in their maturity levels with some students unable to cope with the shift towards taking responsibility for their own learning at senior cycle.

They still think that they are in the Junior Cert and that they want to be pampered, they don't want to take responsibility for their own learning. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

The Leaving Cert aren't really being responsible for themselves at the moment, they don't realise that by not coming in to school, they're not going to do well in their exams because they don't see any evidence of that until sixth year. Until suddenly they do a mock exam and they fail it and they go 'oh god, I don't know anything'. (Dixon Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

On the other hand, increased autonomy was seen as facilitating improved teacher-student relations for some students, an important issue given the crucial role positive teacher-student interaction was found to play in promoting student engagement at junior cycle (see Smyth et al., 2007):

Well they are given a lot more autonomy and given a lot more scope themselves to make the choices and I suppose teachers deal with them in a different manner as well. You expect a certain level of

maturation that should be reciprocal from the teacher as well and oftentimes it works that way. ... There's a social aspect that they are more amenable to staff, staff more amenable to them, the one-to-one interaction with staff is more friendly, I suppose, for most of them. And we can deal with them as adults, semi-adults ... So I think their relationship between teachers and themselves is probably healthier now, in that they are not little boys anymore, they are growing into men as such. (Lang Street, staff, boys' school, working-class intake)

In addition, a number of staff reported that making the 'wrong' subject choices caused difficulties for certain students, with some students regretting the choices they had made or finding that subjects were not what they had expected:

I would have one or two people that would have come in, in quite an upset state saying that 'I'm not fit for this subject, this is too overwhelming, the amount of stuff we have to do for it, we didn't have that much homework last year'. I would find that transition for some quite difficult. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

The main problems I would have met would be in subject choice, that they would have found themselves in a particular subject and finding it too difficult to cope with. So let's say one case in point that has been raised again and again is Physics. So they would not have done honours Maths at Junior Cert, they would have maybe have done pass Science in Junior Cert and honours Physics is a gulf from that ... so they're struggling and struggling big time with it. (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

A number of staff emphasised that adjustment issues differed depending on the Leaving Certificate programme taken, with fewer transition difficulties among those taking the LCA programme:

It is academic difficulties, it's a feeling of 'oh my god I haven't a clue what's going on'. Leaving Cert Applied is different because academically it's nearly easier to what they've been used to ... but they've a huge amount of responsibility in Leaving Cert Applied that the Leaving Certs don't have, they have to be here every day or they lose a mark straight away. If they don't come in, they lose marks off their Leaving Cert straight away. So the Leaving Cert Applied become very responsible for themselves but the Leaving Certs don't. And academically sometimes ... like if you have clever enough stu-

dents in Leaving Cert Applied they might get bored ... whereas Leaving Cert, it's like the opposite, they are totally opposite kind of things. (Dixon Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

LCVP was seen as making additional demands on students' ability to take responsibility for their own tasks:

I would find that with LCVP at times, some students may be a little bit too immature to take on responsibility ... I suppose the way it would manifest itself you know just from the experience, I'm talking about mini companies, they wouldn't be able to accept responsibility. They might be given responsibility for one aspect of the company, they have difficulty accepting that, that's the way I would see it. (Dawes Point, staff, boys' school, working-class intake)

A second set of difficulties related to the fact that students were simultaneously making the transition to adulthood. The transition to senior cycle thus mirrored broader changes in young people's lives outside school, with resulting 'emotional upheaval there and insecurity ... going from being boys to adults' (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake). Many students were now engaged in part-time work and involved in relationships, which 'kind of distracts them' (Belmore Street, staff, girls' school, mixed intake):

They would have fairly developed social lives, and they work part-time to fund this, and there would be a lot of students with part-time jobs. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

However, some students were seen as experiencing difficulties in adjusting to their new freedom, and peer pressure was viewed as a strong influence on their lives:

Their interest in stuff seems to develop, and they're level of maybe 'oh I'm allowed go out', so they get in with the drinking crowd, or the smoking crowd, so all these things have completely changed. I also find that they are fighting over fellows, particularly from the girls' point of view ... they'll fight, and the bitching among girls is just unreal. The isolation that, in particularly girls, notice it's all girls, the isolation of some of the girls ... among their peers, because they might wear a top that's not that fashionable or something like

that, is ridiculous. Boys have a tendency just to kind of get on with it. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

It's a whole different ball game, ... they have to become adults or adolescents over a summer period. They're just kids when they're in Junior Cert and then suddenly they move into senior cycle and some kids can cope with it very well, but they would be rather more mature anyway when they were in third year, but others find it difficult enough to, to settle into the more mature aspects of it. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

In addition, problems outside school, particularly relating to family difficulties, were seen as impinging more on students at this stage.

At senior cycle it's wider issues usually outside of school. Issues, problems that they have outside of school, family problems ... there are some very serious family issues that are impinging on some of the girls in fifth year, you know. And boyfriends become a huge issue as well and I suppose sex, the whole area of sexuality, you know, is a major issue, I think. I think ... events outside school really begin to impinge. A lot of them are living pretty adult lives and a lot of them are very independent. (Harris Street, staff, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Transition Year was seen by most key personnel as assisting the transition into fifth year, enhancing student maturity and helping students to make the necessary adjustment:

The transition from Junior Cert to TY I think gives them a lot more space so there isn't the same pressure on them to cope immediately with school and social and emotional development so I think they can concentrate a little bit on their social and emotional and other aspects. (Belmore Street, staff, girls' school, mixed intake)

Some staff highlighted the initial difficulties experienced by students in settling into fifth year after taking TY, a pattern which was somewhat more common in schools where TY was compulsory:

Some of them definitely found it hard and they found it hard because they felt they got lazy in Transition Year and they weren't being pushed enough in Transition Year. (Wattle Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)



However, in the longer term, the greater maturity of former TY participants was viewed as easing the transition to the Leaving Certificate programme, with those students moving directly from third year into fifth year seen to experience greater difficulties.

Certainly those who don't take fourth year on the other hand, who go straight into year five, if they are of an age where they are relatively immature they are certainly at a disadvantage. ... Because remember they are probably going to be meeting kids who have been in year four. We have such high uptake in year four, those kids are all going to be the majority in our year five and if you were a non-year four person and you happened to be maybe middle of the road or average, the pace may well be too much for you in certain areas. (Argyle Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

Staff in the predominantly working-class schools (along with Dawson Street, a mixed intake school) were more likely to report difficulties among students making the transition to senior cycle than staff in other schools. In addition to the 'gap' between junior and senior cycle reported across many of the schools, staff in these schools indicated difficulties in motivating students in fifth year and impressing on them the importance of working at this stage:

If they haven't upped the notch in fifth year, then they have to maybe lift it three notches in sixth year, which may be beyond them because they have got into a kind of a routine, a rhythm if you like, which is not satisfactory at the present time. (Dawes Point, staff, boys' school, working-class intake)

In addition, attendance is seen as a problem for some students in working-class schools and a number of students dropped out of school over the course of moving to senior cycle:

The attendance has been a huge problem, that bit more freedom that they have in fifth year, I think they haven't taken to it all that well, I think they're kind of abusing it a little bit. (Dixon Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

In one working-class school in particular, a number of students had dropped out of school over the period of transition to senior cycle, at

least in part because of adjustment difficulties (see Byrne and Smyth, 2010):

I would say we would have a fairly substantial percentage just don't do well at the transition and drop out. ... The reasons would be some of them have jobs, very few of them now at this stage but most of them just decided that, I'd say, they just weren't prepared for the discipline of having to be here every day and then would, in most cases they would have a history of non-attendance and that would be the common link between all of them that have left. (Dixon Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

In sum, staff generally reported that students experienced some difficulties in making the adjustment to senior cycle. Such difficulties generally related to a 'gap' in standards between junior and senior cycle, in keeping with student accounts in Chapters Four and Five, as well as the more general transition to adulthood. Transition Year was seen as enhancing student maturity and thus assisting their adjustment to senior cycle, although some students experienced at least temporary difficulties in engaging with schoolwork. Key personnel also highlighted differences in student experiences across programmes, with LCA students less likely to experience a gap in demands between junior and senior cycle. The following sections look at the issue of the transition to senior cycle from the student perspective, comparing attitudes to school before and after the move into fifth year.

### **6.3 Attitudes to School and Teachers**

This section explores changes in student attitudes over the transition to senior cycle, focusing in particular on whether they like school and their teachers and on how they rate their own ability to cope with schoolwork.

#### *6.3.1 Liking School*

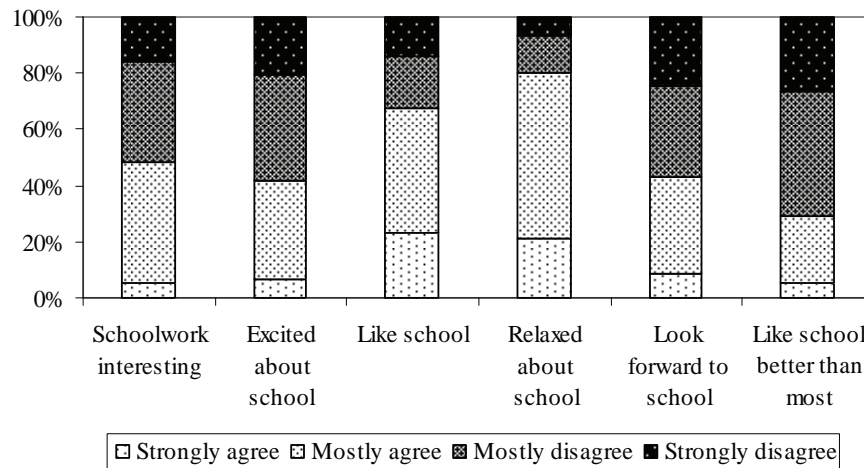
The extent to which students were considered to like school was based on their agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

- I find schoolwork in this school really interesting.
- I am excited about being at this school.

- I like being at this school.
- I usually feel relaxed about school.
- I look forward to coming to school most days.
- I like school better than most other students in this school.

Students had been presented with this set of statements since first year, which allows us to explore the extent to which an individual student changes their opinion of school as they move through the system.

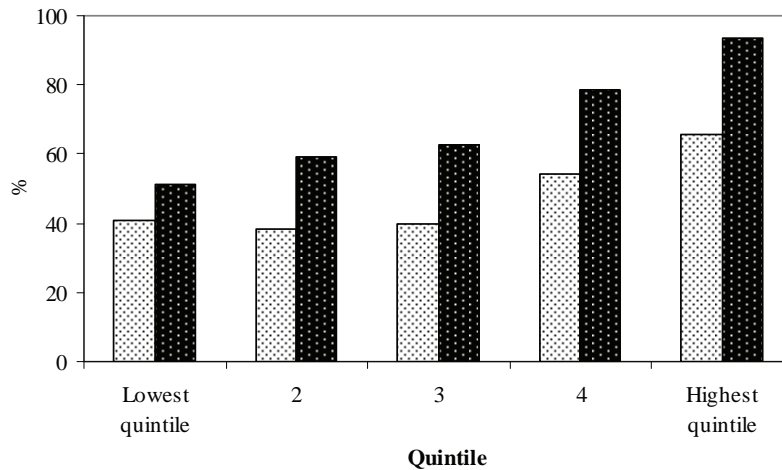
**Figure 6.1: Attitudes to school among fifth year students**



As at junior cycle, student attitudes towards school tend to be broadly positive. Four-fifths of fifth year students feel relaxed about school while two-thirds like being at their school (Figure 6.1). However, around half do not find schoolwork interesting and do not look forward to coming to school most days. Responses to the six statements were summed to give an overall measure of ‘liking school’ (with a reliability of 0.8). Using this scale, female students are found to be somewhat more positive about school than their male counterparts. Attitudes are somewhat more positive among those from professional or farming backgrounds than those from working-class backgrounds. Newcomer students are significantly more positive about school than other students. Attitudes to school be-

come more positive moving up the performance distribution, with the most positive attitudes found among those in the highest quintile (that is, the top fifth in terms of Junior Certificate grades). Those with the highest Junior Certificate grades are particularly likely to report finding their schoolwork interesting and liking their school; almost all of the highest quintile 'like being at this school' compared with half of the lowest quintile (Figure 6.2).

**Figure 6.2: 'I find school-work in this school really interesting' and 'I like being at this school' (per cent 'agree/strongly agree') by Junior Certificate grade**



There is no significant variation in liking school by Leaving Certificate programme. However, LCA students are somewhat more likely than others to report that 'I look forward to coming to school most days' (66 per cent compared with 41-44 per cent for LCE/LCVP students), reflecting the way in which LCA appears to facilitate some young people's re-engagement in school (see Banks et al., 2010). As might be expected, attitudes to school are more positive among those who are satisfied with the Leaving Certificate programme they are taking. Those who have taken Transition Year tend to be more positive about school than other students, although this may reflect the fact that the more highly engaged students tended to enrol in Transition Year in the first place (see Chapter Two). Attitudes vary across the case-study schools, with the most posi-

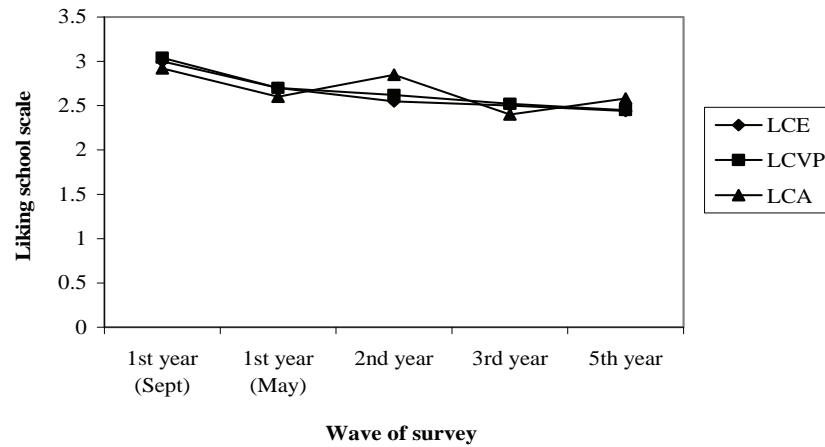
tive attitudes found in Fig Lane and Barrack Street, schools with contrasting social intakes, and the least positive in Dawson Street, Lang Street and Dixon Street. It is worth noting that key personnel in the latter schools tended to report more difficulties in the transition to senior cycle (see above). As was the case in junior cycle (Smyth et al., 2007), students who have experienced more frequent positive interaction with teachers tend to be more positive about school while those who have been frequently reprimanded tend to be less positive. Those who had been in a lower stream class at junior cycle tend to have the least positive attitudes while those from mixed ability classes have the most positive attitudes.

Comparing attitudes in third and fifth year, there is a slight reduction in the extent to which students like school. This is evident for both male and female students, and for Transition Year participants and non-participants. Students who enter LCE or LCVP report a decline in attitudes to school while those entering LCA report an improvement in their attitudes to school.<sup>1</sup> Figure 6.3 shows the trend over the whole of the schooling career; data are presented for each of the five waves (time-points) of the survey. Because two of the case-study schools joined the study in second year, the figure relates to the ten schools for which we have information at every wave. There is an overall decline in liking school across all of the groups, but a slight recovery for the LCA group in fifth year (Figure 6.3). Those who find their teachers stricter in fifth year than in third year report the largest decline in attitudes to school. The decline also varies by Junior Certificate performance, with the greatest decline in the medium to low grade levels (quintiles two and three).

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<sup>1</sup> These results should be interpreted with some caution due to the relatively small number of LCA students involved.

**Figure 6.3: Liking school (mean value) over time by Leaving Certificate programme (10 schools)**

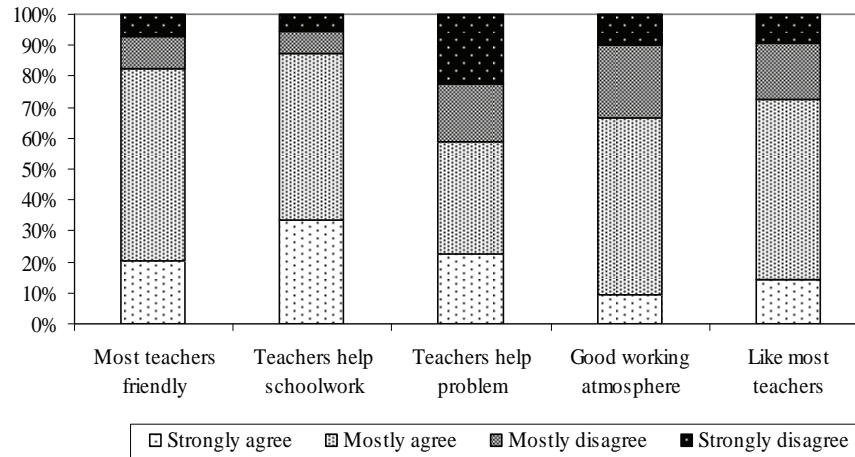


### 6.3.2 Liking Teachers

This measure was based on student responses to the following statements:

- I think most of my teachers are friendly.
- My teachers would help me if I had a problem with my schoolwork.
- I could talk to at least one of my teachers if I had a problem.
- Most of the time there is a good working atmosphere in the class.
- I like most of my teachers.

Fifth year students are generally positive about their teachers. Over four-fifths find most of their teachers friendly and feel their teachers would help them with any problems with their schoolwork (Figure 6.4). Almost three-quarters of students report liking most of their teachers while two-thirds report a good working atmosphere in class. Students are somewhat less likely to consider that they could talk to their teachers regarding a problem, with over four in ten feeling they could not.

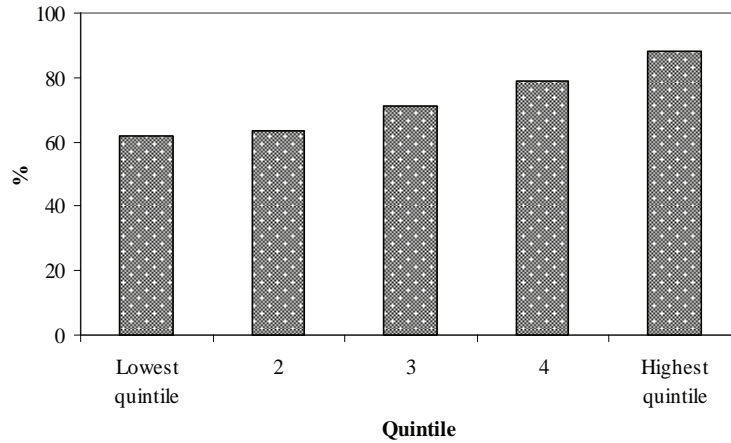
**Figure 6.4: Attitudes to teachers among fifth year students**

The responses were summed into an overall scale of attitudes to teachers (with a reliability of 0.76). Female students have significantly more positive attitudes to teachers than male students, and this difference is more marked than the gender difference in liking school. Students with higher Junior Certificate grades tend to have more positive attitudes to teachers in fifth year. For example, the vast majority of the top quintile report liking most of their teachers compared to six in ten of the lowest quintile (Figure 6.5). There is no significant variation in liking teachers by Leaving Certificate programme or by whether students had taken Transition Year. Attitudes to teachers vary significantly across schools, with the most positive attitudes in Fig Lane and Wattle Street, and the least positive in Park Street and Lang Street. As might be expected, students who are positive about their teachers also tend to be positive about school ( $r=+0.6$ ). Not surprisingly, students are more positive about their teachers where they have received positive interaction and less positive when they have received negative interaction.

The extent to which students like their teachers is relatively stable between third and fifth year, with little variation in trends across different groups of students. However, those entering LCA report a slight improvement in their attitudes to teachers over time. Those who find teachers stricter in fifth year report a decline in 'liking teachers'. Furthermore,

those in the highest-performing group (the top quintile on the basis of Junior Certificate grades) report an increase in the extent to which they like their teachers.

**Figure 6.5: 'I like most of my teachers' (per cent 'strongly agree/agree') by Junior Certificate performance**



### 6.3.3 Academic Self-image

The measure of academic self-image was based on the following statements:

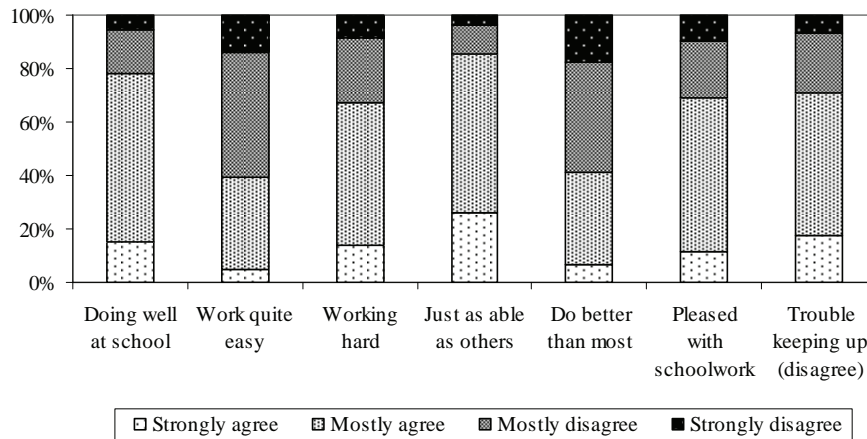
- I think I am doing well at this school.
- I think the work is quite easy at this school.
- I think I am working hard at this school.
- I am able to do my schoolwork as well as most other students.
- I do better at schoolwork than most other students in my class.
- I'm quite pleased with how my schoolwork is going.
- I have trouble keeping up with my schoolwork (disagree).

Many staff and students had reported a 'jump' in standards and demands between the junior and senior cycle. However, it is worth noting that the majority of fifth year students were broadly pleased with how they were



faring academically. Eighty-five per cent reported that they were 'able to do my school-work as well as most other students' while three-quarters felt they were 'doing well at this school' (Figure 6.6). However, almost a third of students had trouble keeping up with their schoolwork or were not pleased with how their schoolwork was going. It would appear that some students were interpreting 'doing well' in a broad sense, while having some difficulties with schoolwork, perhaps in a subset of subjects.

**Figure 6.6: Academic self-image among fifth year students**



These items were combined into a scale of academic self-image (with an alpha of 0.79). Male students have higher self-ratings than female students, in keeping with previous research (Hannan et al., 1996). Academic self-image reflects prior performance, with the most positive self-image found among those who received higher Junior Certificate grades. LCA students tend to have more positive self-images than LCE and LCVP students; this could reflect the 'frog-pond effect' (see Marsh, 1987) where students compare themselves to their immediate peers rather than the year group as a whole. For LCA, their more positive self-images mainly reflect the fact that they find the work quite easy. Having taken Transition Year is not associated with any change in academic self-image. There is no significant variation across schools in academic self-image, again indicating that students take account of their immediate context in judging how they are faring. Students with more positive self-

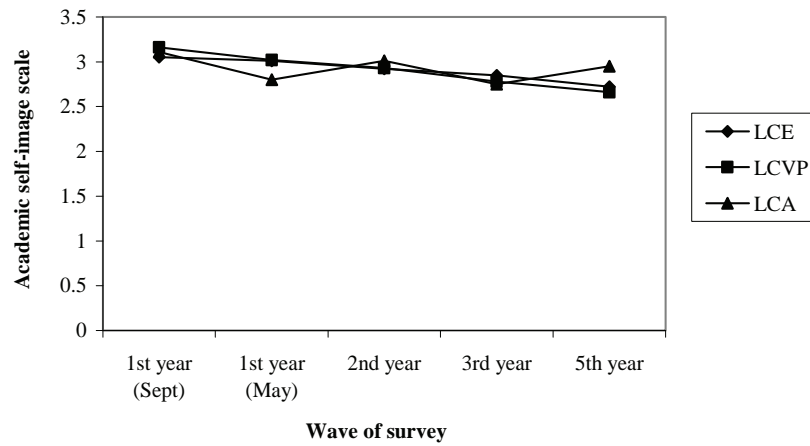
images are more positive about school and teachers; they are more likely to have received positive feedback from teachers and less likely to have been frequently reprimanded. Self-image is less positive among students who have been bullied so being targeted by bullies appears to impact not only on the social dimension of students' self-image but also on how they feel they are faring academically.

Over the transition to fifth year, students become less confident about their capacity to cope with schoolwork, that is, their academic self-image becomes more negative. This is very much in keeping with the proportion of students who reported a gap between schoolwork demands in junior and senior cycle (see Chapters Three and Four). This decline in academic self-image occurs for both male and female students, and is evident whether or not students took Transition Year. LCE and LCVP students experience a decline in their academic self-image while those in LCA experience a more positive academic self-image than they had in third year. Students who find schoolwork harder than in third year are more likely to experience a decline in academic self-image. Looking at patterns in a longer-term perspective, students are generally less positive about their ability to cope with schoolwork as they move through the schooling system (Figure 6.7). In comparison with other students, there is some improvement in the relative position of LCA students in the transition from third to fifth year.

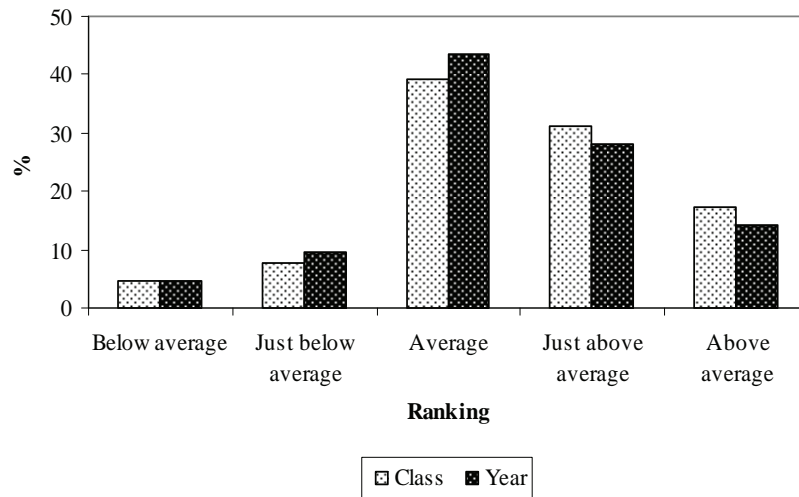
Students were also asked to rate themselves academically in relation to their class and year group. Fifth year students tend to rate themselves as 'average' or 'just above average' in relation to their class and year group (Figure 6.8). Male students tend to rank themselves higher than female students, particularly in relation to the year group as a whole. Students from professional or farming backgrounds tend to rate themselves more highly than those from working-class backgrounds. Self-rating tends to be consistent with prior performance, with higher self-ratings among students who achieved higher Junior Certificate grades. There is no variation in self-ranking by Leaving Certificate programme, whether the student had taken Transition Year or the school they attend. Students who like school and teachers rate themselves more highly than other students. High self-rating is associated with positive interaction with teachers while low self-rating is associated with negative interaction

with teachers so the nature of feedback from teachers appears to influence how students view their abilities and capacities.

**Figure 6.7: Academic self-image over time (10 schools)**



**Figure 6.8: Self-rating in relation to class and year group**



### 6.4 Relations with Teachers

Analyses in Chapter Three indicated that fifth year students are divided between finding their teachers more easy-going or ‘about the same’

compared with third year; a minority of students found their teachers stricter than previously. The group interviews with students allowed us to explore their relations with teachers in greater detail. During these interviews, many students reported increasingly positive relationships with teachers during senior cycle. Students often commented that teachers treated them more as ‘adults’ and with more respect than in previous years. They also reported being ‘listened to’ on a more frequent basis and being spoken to as equals: ‘he’d talk to you at your level’ (Park Street, LCVP, boys’ school, mixed intake). Students noted that teachers had a different mode of interacting with them this year: ‘It’s actually kind of different because teachers talk to you now, not talk at you; they talk with you kind of’ (Belmore Street, LCE, girls’ school, mixed intake). These improved relations were seen as reflecting both a more relaxed approach on the part of teachers and greater maturity on the part of students:

You have more respect for the teachers as well.

They treat you better.

...

*Interviewer:* And why do you think that is?

Because we’re older, more mature now, I don’t know, [they] just see us as adults I suppose now rather than kids. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

These improved relations were seen as having positive consequences for students’ school life:

When you’re in junior [cycle], they don’t listen.

I feel sorry actually for the juniors in the school now that they don’t really have the same relationship we do with our teachers, kind of you’re more at ease and you don’t feel as uptight about everything. (Belmore Street, LCVP, girls’ school, mixed intake)

Higher teacher expectations were reported by a number of students, with students expected to take more responsibility regarding their behaviour

and learning: 'They expect you to have more cop on, more sense' (Fig Lane, LCVP, coed school, middle-class intake).

They're just less bitchy towards you, do you know what I mean, [but] they expect more out of you, you're fifth years now, that sentence wrecks our head, heard so much this year, you're fifth years now, you should know better, it's like, hello one year later. (Belmore Street, LCVP, girls' school, mixed intake)

Many students commented on the characteristics of a good teacher. Their reports were consistent with the views they had offered earlier on in their schooling career (see Smyth et al., 2007) and reflect the kinds of characteristics emphasised by young people in other educational systems (see, for example, Noguera, 2007). Qualities usually included teacher interest in the subject but also being able to convey information in an accessible manner:

*Interviewer:* So what do you think makes a good teacher, a good lesson?

A good attitude towards it, towards the student and towards the subject.

Yeah, if you're able to retain the information they have. Because some I know some teachers that ... have the knowledge of the subject but they're not just that good at...

Getting it out, yeah.

Getting it out.

Explaining it.

You know they have the information themselves but they're just not able to portray it in such a matter that the class would understand. (Belmore Street, LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

Many students appreciated the amount of time some teachers would devote to them:

He just works hard.

He makes sure you know.

He works hard, we work harder.

He would stay four hours just to make one sheet for one day.

He's very dedicated.

And he has other classes to do as well.

Yeah, I always feel like we are the most important class when we are with him, I don't know why but I think every class feels that. (Lang Street, LCE, boys' school, working-class intake)

They're [teachers are] very good to us, they spend a lot of time doing our task work with us and things, they'd be very good. (Belmore Street, LCA, girls' school, mixed intake)

In addition, getting on well with the teacher was perceived as being important in terms of doing well in a particular subject. One quite long quote illustrates well the way in which positive interaction with teachers inspires students to engage with a subject while negative interaction can result in student disengagement:

It depends on your teacher, it really does, because I have [teacher name] and I never done Science at all and ...

She's a very good teacher.

Like I'm only starting it and I understand all of it and I'm really, really interested in it like. I do enjoy it and I do understand it a lot like compared to people who have done it and they haven't got a clue like.

...

If the teacher doesn't like you then you're gone, because she doesn't like you.

Yeah, because like if you don't get on with a teacher, they don't . . .

Put in as much effort to you . . .

Yeah, to teach you, yeah, that is the truth like because I find that she freaks real easy at me like because I'm a bit of a chatter but like I still listen but like if she's nice to me, I'm nice to her and like if

you're getting on well with a teacher like, if you like a teacher you can learn much better.

Yeah, you can.

Much better.

It depends on the teacher though big time, because if they don't have an interest of course you're not going to have one, because they are not selling it to you. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

The ability of the teacher to control the class without constantly 'giving out' is also seen as important in terms of student enjoyment of the class.

And [teacher name] and [teacher name], they are all good teachers. That is why we like the subjects because they kind of make it interesting, you know.

They do their best like and ... they don't give out over every little thing like. And they don't make us look negative towards the subject. (Dawes Point, LCE, boys' school, working-class intake)

You can kind of have the craic in class, you can say something and they won't give out to you like ... I don't know they'll just kind of mess back and they'll go in to teaching which is grand like because at least, I don't know, you like them now and you listen to them in any way.

So it's just it's better, it's better than just giving out constantly. (Belmore Street, LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)

Some students had more negative views of their teachers in fifth year. One reason for dissatisfaction related to the teacher's inability to control the class and the resulting disruption of learning time:

The teachers are absolutely shocking, I am learning nothing, ... some teachers can't control the class, some teachers couldn't be bothered or really they don't care and then just some people you can't understand, some teachers teaching and I would have preferred to have old teachers that I had last year. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

We've got a load of messers in our class, she spends thirty minutes of the class just going just shut up, I don't know, we just haven't learned anything at all, we're so behind. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

The quality of teaching was a second factor underlying dissatisfaction on the part of some students:

There's only one [teacher] I'd want to change. Because if you don't have a teacher that you feel is teaching you properly, then you just don't pay any interest in the subject. So then you do badly in it and like you don't think you're learning what you should be learning because you hear your friends saying, like before a test they'd be like, ah I don't know this section and you're like, I haven't even done that section. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

*Interviewer:* What would you say you like least about this year?

Some of the teachers are chronic, I'm so worried about next year.

*Interviewer:* What do you mean they're chronic?

Oh they're just terrible, really, really bad like, really, really, really bad, I know they say half the work is your own as well, that's fair enough but there's only so much you can do. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

The ability to ask questions in class was highlighted by a number of students as being decisive in their liking of the teacher, and consequently enjoyment of the subject. Some felt that this had improved since junior cycle, while others still felt it to be a significant problem in fifth year.

She's so mean, if anyone asks a question she's just, 'you should know that already'... she's just not a nice person at all. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

There's a few more classes now where they'll say like if you don't understand it ask, where beforehand you were kind of afraid to ask. Well not afraid to ask but just you know. (Belmore Street, LCE, girls' school, mixed intake)



Some students were clearly influenced by their relationship with the teacher when making their subject choices (see also Chapter Four). This related to the fact that students were more likely to work harder at subjects they had an interest in, and the interest was often closely related to the subject teacher concerned.

Some of the teachers are saying for the subject choice, they're like 'don't choose a subject for the teacher'. I don't think that's true because if you know what teacher you're going to get for a certain subject you know you're going to work at it. For instance, if it's a teacher you hate and a good teacher, the results in your Junior Cert prove that you don't do that well if you don't like the teacher because you're not bothered so. (Harris Street, TY, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Previous research on second-level education indicates that a 'strict but fair' climate enhances student academic performance (Smyth, 1999). However, second-level schools can be characterised as hierarchical in nature, with inequality in power between teachers and students (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). This viewpoint was echoed by one student who stated that 'they think because they're your teacher, they can say whatever they want to you' (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake). Throughout the course of this longitudinal study, students were often vociferous about unfair treatment by teachers; this unfairness could reflect some teachers treating them differently than other teachers and/or some students being treated differently by different teachers. Just over half of fifth year students disagreed with the statement that 'the rules of this school are fair'. Perceived unfairness was more frequently reported by male students, Traveller students, students with lower exam grades, and those who had not taken Transition Year. Variation was also evident across the case-study schools. In the group interviews, some of the fifth year students cited unfair treatment as negatively impacting on their relations with teachers, with a negative cycle of 'acting up' and 'being given out to' emerging for some students as in junior cycle.

But it's very frustrating as well when you're getting into trouble and you know you're in the right, if I was in the wrong I'd admit to it and I wouldn't give out like, I wouldn't answer back or anything but if I know I'm in the right I would and it gets you like your temper going,

you just want to get up and give them a box. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

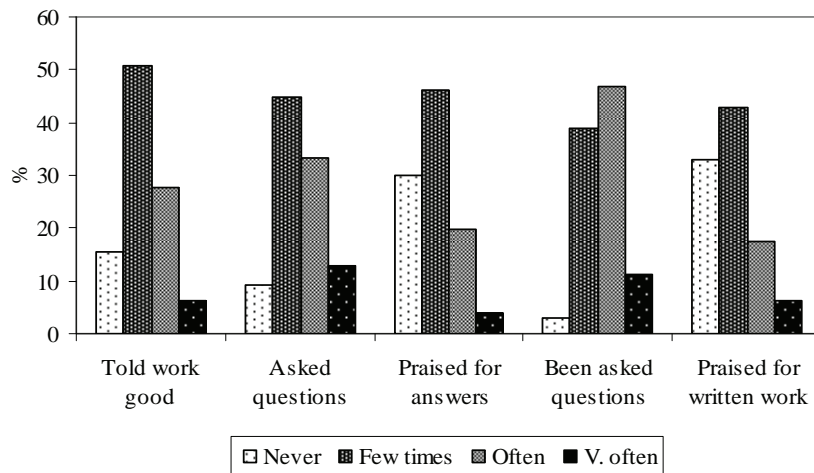
Some students felt that teachers had an unfair perception of them, based on their behaviour in previous years, holding 'grudges ... stereotypes' (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake). Some students experienced problems relating to constantly changing teachers and an over-reliance on substitute or new student teachers. They felt this had implications for their learning and progression throughout fifth year because 'each teacher has a different way of teaching and so you just get thrown' (Belmore Street, LCE, girls' school, mixed intake).

Information from the student survey allows us to further explore in the remainder of this section the extent to which the nature of teacher-student interaction has changed since junior cycle.

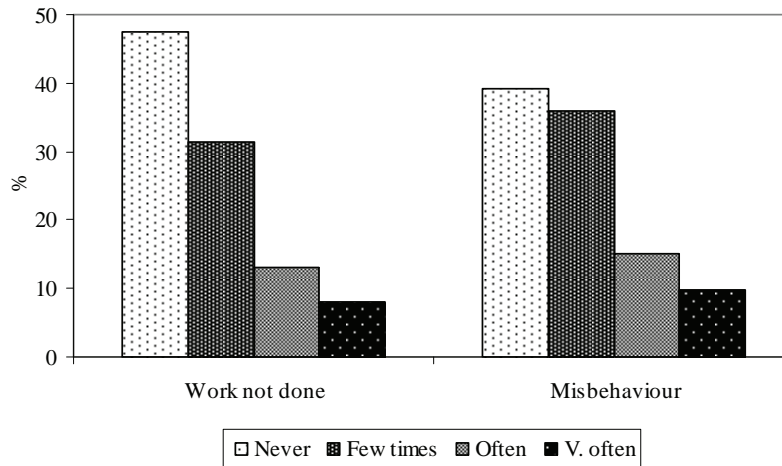
#### *6.4.1 Teacher-student Interaction Patterns*

The survey of students collected information on the frequency of positive and negative interaction mid-way through fifth year between teachers and students in the school. The measure of positive teacher-student interaction was based on the extent to which students had been told their work was good by a teacher, had asked questions in class, had been asked questions in class, had been praised for asking a question, and had been praised for doing their written work well. The most frequent form of positive teacher-student interaction for fifth year students was asking or being asked questions in class. In the two weeks prior to the survey, over half of students reported such direct contact on a frequent basis (Figure 6.9). In contrast, the incidence of praise or positive feedback from teachers was lower. Almost a third of students reported that they had never been praised for answers in class or for their written work in the two weeks prior to the study.

**Figure 6.9: Frequency of different forms of positive teacher-student interaction**



The frequency of positive interaction is found to differ by Leaving Certificate programme as well as by student characteristics. Students taking the LCA programme report higher levels of positive interaction with their teachers than those taking LCE or LCVP; this perhaps reflects the smaller class sizes involved but may reflect a deliberate use of positive reinforcement with the LCA group. Male and female students do not differ in their experience of positive interaction. Traveller students report higher levels of positive interaction as do newcomer students. Again, this may reflect a greater emphasis on providing positive reinforcement for these students. Having taken Transition Year has no association with frequency of positive interaction. Students in the top two Junior Certificate performance quintiles tend to report higher levels of positive interaction than other students.

**Figure 6.10: Frequency of negative teacher-student interaction**

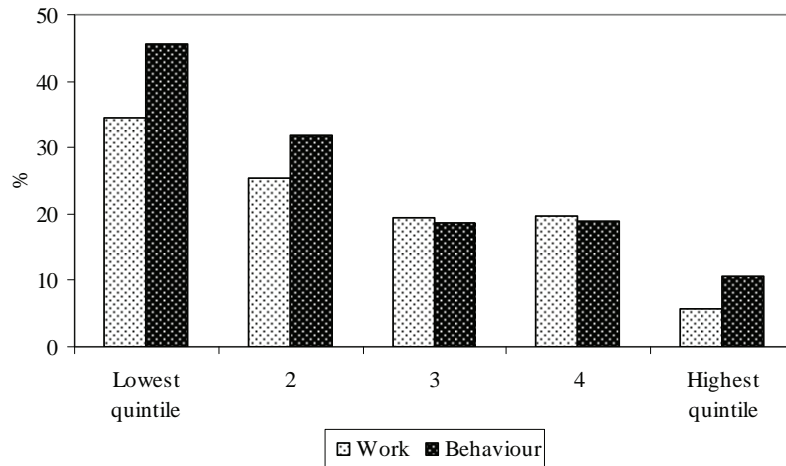
Negative teacher-student interaction was measured in terms of the frequency with which students reported having been 'given out to' by teachers. The majority of fifth year students had rarely or never been reprimanded by their teachers for their work or their misbehaviour in the two weeks prior to the survey (Figure 6.10). However, a quarter of students had frequently been given out for their misbehaviour while a fifth had been frequently given out to because their work was untidy or not done on time.

As well as reporting higher levels of positive interaction, LCA students report significantly higher levels of negative interaction with their teachers than LCE/LCVP students. It would appear, therefore, that the smaller class sizes resulted in much greater interaction, positive and negative, for LCA students. In keeping with the patterns at junior cycle, female students report significantly lower levels of negative interaction than their male counterparts. Traveller students report higher levels of negative interaction than settled students. Students who had taken Transition Year report lower levels of negative interaction; this is partly related to the fact that these students had lower rates of misbehaviour at junior cycle than non-participants.

Levels of negative interaction are significantly higher for lower achieving students. Over a third of the lowest quintile group had been

frequently reprimanded on the basis of their schoolwork in the two weeks prior to the survey while this was the case for only 6 per cent of the top quintile (Figure 6.11). Similarly, almost half of the bottom quintile had been given out to for misbehaving compared with a tenth of the highest-performing students.

**Figure 6.11: Frequency of negative interaction by Junior Certificate performance**



Positive and negative interaction levels are related to students' perceptions of the transition process. Both positive and negative levels are higher among those students, mainly taking the LCA programme, who find schoolwork easier than in third year. Positive interaction is more frequent, and negative interaction less frequent, among students who report spending more time on homework in fifth year than in third year. Interaction is also significantly associated with the extent to which teachers are seen as stricter or more easy-going than in third year. Students with higher levels of positive interaction are more satisfied with the programme they are taking while those with higher levels of negative interaction are less satisfied.

Comparing levels of positive and negative interaction for the same students in third year and fifth year, we find that the frequency of both kinds of teacher-student interaction declines over time. This decline occurs for both male and female students; however, the decline in the fre-

quency of positive interaction is somewhat greater for females. These changes are evident regardless of whether students took Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate programme they take and their Junior Certificate performance. Such trends are also evident in both working-class and mixed/middle-class schools. The decline in the frequency of student-teacher interaction would appear to be consistent with the student interviews which report teachers allowing them greater independence regarding their schoolwork in fifth year (see above). The decline in the frequency of positive interaction is greatest for those students who report finding schoolwork harder and their teachers stricter in fifth year than in third year. Similarly, students who report that their teachers are stricter are more likely to have experienced an increase in negative interaction with their teachers compared to the overall pattern of a decline in such interaction.

**Figure 6.12: Trends in positive and negative teacher-student interaction by gender (10 schools)**

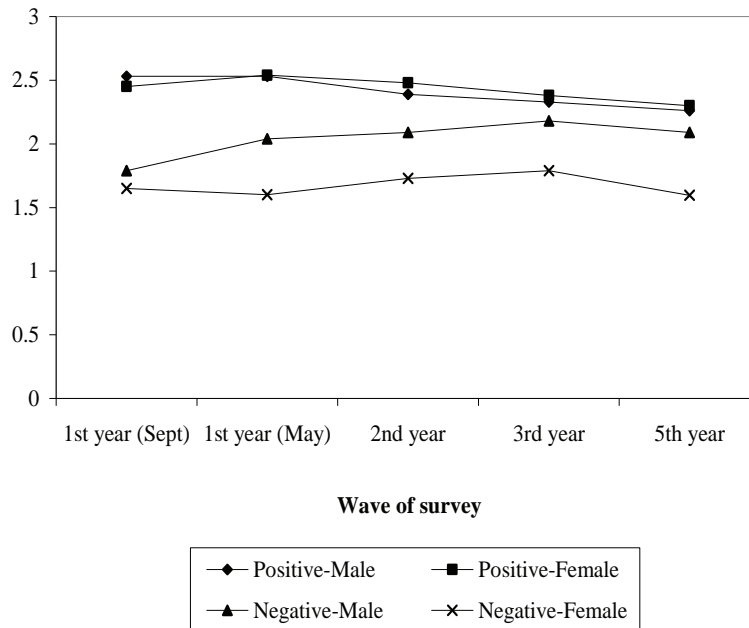
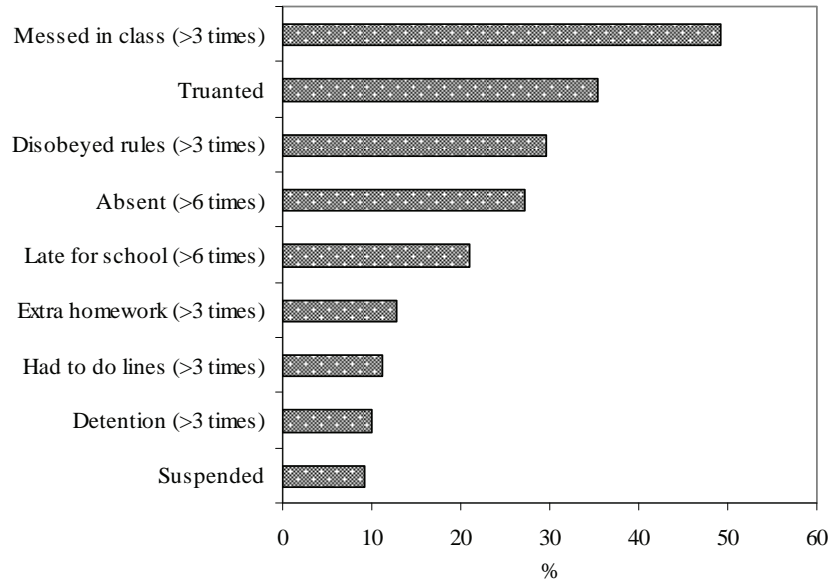


Figure 6.12 shows the trend over students' schooling careers in the prevalence of positive and negative interaction with their teachers. The frequency of positive interaction declines from the end of first year as students move through the school system, a pattern which is evident for both male and female students. The frequency of negative interaction increases as students move through junior cycle with a decline on the transition to senior cycle, to a level comparable to that found among second years. It is also apparent that the gender gap in negative interaction becomes more pronounced over time, with male students almost as likely to experience negative interaction as positive interaction by the end of the period while female students are much more likely to experience positive than negative interaction.

#### *6.4.2 Misbehaviour*

As in the previous years, the most frequent form of misbehaviour was 'messing' in class; around half of fifth year students in the case-study schools reported that they had messed in class on at least three occasions since the start of the school year (Figure 6.13). Over a third of students had truanted, a higher proportion than at junior cycle level. In addition, over a quarter of students had been absent from school on at least six occasions while a fifth had been late for school as often. Frequent detention and suspension were experienced by around a tenth of the student cohort.

Clear gender differences are evident in the behaviour patterns of students; male students are more likely to be late for school, to get into trouble for not following the school rules, to 'mess' in class, and to receive 'lines' or extra homework as punishment. Female students are much less likely to have received detention than their male counterparts (21 per cent compared with 40 per cent on at least one occasion) or to have been suspended (5 per cent as opposed 14 per cent). School absence levels are similar for male and female students as are truancy rates. Some differences in behaviour patterns are evident among minority groups. Newcomer students are less likely to 'mess' in class than Irish students. Traveller students are more likely to be late for school and to truant from school; they are also more likely to receive lines or extra homework as punishment and to have been suspended (a third had been suspended compared with 8 per cent of settled students).

**Figure 6.13: Levels of misbehaviour among fifth year students**

Being late for school and school absenteeism vary by prior Junior Certificate performance, with higher levels among those in the lowest quintiles. This is also the case for other forms of misbehaviour, including getting into trouble for not following school rules, receiving lines or extra homework as punishment, receiving detention and truancy. Half of those in the lowest quintile have truanted during fifth year compared with less than a quarter of those in the highest quintile. Similarly, half of those in the lowest quintile have received detention on at least one occasion compared with 15 per cent of those in the highest quintile. Furthermore, a quarter of those in the lowest quintile have been suspended compared with one per cent of the highest quintile. Messing in class does not vary by prior performance, being a relatively common phenomenon across all groups of students.

Differences are evident across Leaving Certificate programmes. LCA students are more likely to be late for school, get into trouble for disobeying rules, get lines as punishment, and receive detention. They are also more likely to have truanted, with 51 per cent having done so in fifth year compared with a quarter of LCE and LCVP students. They are more likely to have been suspended from school, with almost half having



been suspended in fifth year compared with 6-7 per cent of LCE/LCVP students. This pattern is not wholly explicable in terms of the gender and ability profile of LCA students; however, it may be due to the fact that levels of prior misbehaviour are higher among young people entering LCA (see Chapter Three).

Those who have taken Transition Year are less likely to get into trouble for not following the school rules, receive detention or receive lines or extra homework as punishment. This pattern is, at least partly, related to the ability profile of students who have taken Transition Year.

Misbehaviour levels are found to vary across the case-study schools. Over half of the students in Dixon Street, a working-class school, are frequently late for school, that is, on six or more occasions. This can be contrasted with 9 to 13 per cent of the fifth years in Dawson Street, Argyll Street and Belmore Street, schools with mixed intakes. School absence rates are highest in Lang Street and Dixon Street, both working-class schools, where almost half of the cohort are frequently absent. Truancy rates are lowest for Barrack Street and Belmore Street, girls' schools, and highest for Dixon Street and Lang Street, working-class schools. Differential levels of misbehaviour interact with school policy to produce between-school variation in the use of particular discipline measures. Detention is most commonly employed in Lang Street and Hay Street, both working-class schools where over half of the student cohort had received detention, but very infrequently used in Belmore Street, Harris Street and Barrack Street, all girls' school where less than a tenth of the cohort had received detention. Suspension has only been very rarely used in Belmore Street and Harris Street, girls' schools, but was more commonly used in Dixon Street (where almost half of the cohort had been suspended).

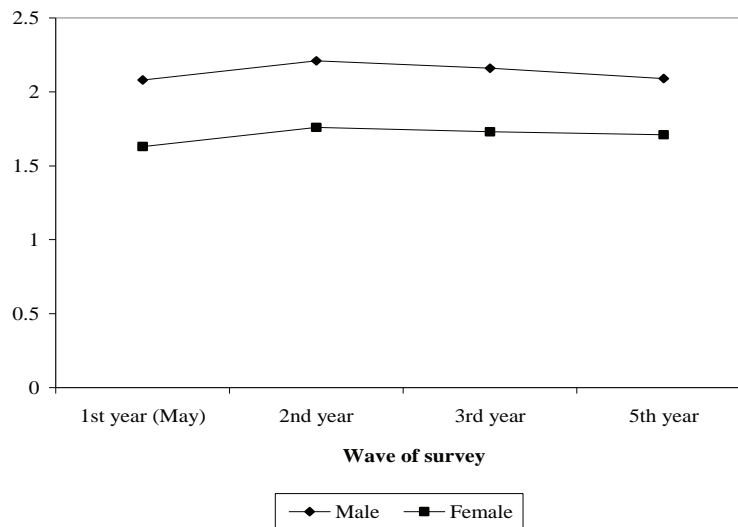
All forms of misbehaviour can be combined into a summary scale (with an alpha of 0.82). Overall levels of misbehaviour are higher among male students, Traveller students, students with lower Junior Certificate grades, those who have not taken Transition Year, those taking LCA, and those in Dixon Street and Lang Street (both working-class schools). As might be expected, there is a relatively strong correlation between misbehaviour levels and frequency of negative teacher-student interaction ( $r=+0.6$ ). Furthermore, students with higher misbehaviour levels report

lower levels of positive teacher-student interaction. Students who reported higher levels of misbehaviour were also more likely to report having been bullied. As might be expected, misbehaviour levels are significantly higher among those who view the schools rules as being unfair.

Misbehaviour levels were relatively stable between third and fifth year for students as a whole. For boys, however, there was a slight reduction in the incidence of misbehaviour while the pattern for girls was one of stability. Students who had taken Transition Year increased their misbehaviour levels while those who went directly into fifth year had a slight decline in their misbehaviour levels. Taking the LCA programme was associated with a decline in misbehaviour while levels for LCE and LCVP students were relatively stable.

Figure 6.14 shows overall misbehaviour levels by gender as students move through the schooling system. Misbehaviour becomes more common between first and second year and then decreases by third year; a further decrease is evident for boys between third year and fifth year. Misbehaviour is more prevalent among boys than girls over the whole of the period studied.

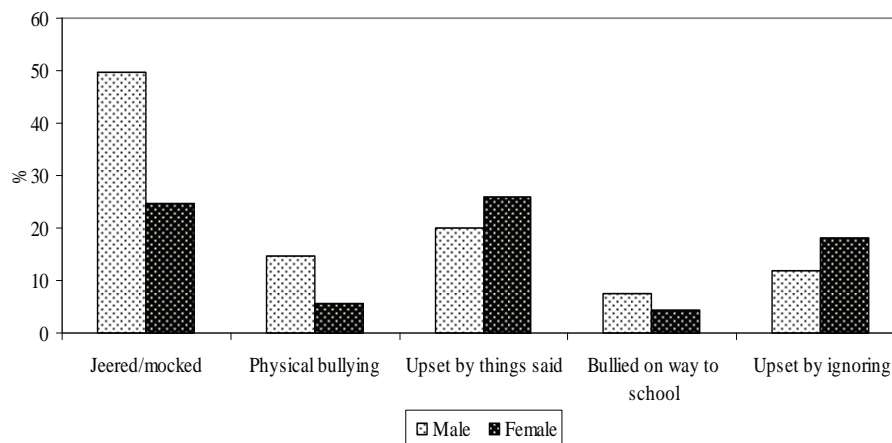
**Figure 6.14: Misbehaviour levels over time by gender (10 schools)**



### 6.5 Relations with Other Students

Three measures of inter-student relations were available from the survey of fifth year students: the extent of bullying, perceived popularity and the sense of isolation. Fifth year students were asked about the extent to which they had experienced different forms of bullying in the two weeks prior to the survey. A number of different dimensions of bullying were considered, including being jeered or mocked, being physically pushed around, being bullied on the way to or from school, being upset by what others said and being upset because of being ignored by others. Among boys, the most common form of bullying was being jeered or mocked by other students while physical bullying was reported by one in six boys (Figure 6.15). Among girls, being jeered/mocked and being upset by things said behind their back were the most common forms of bullying. Boys were more likely than girls to report being jeered, mocked or physically bullied. Girls were more likely to report being upset by things being said about them or by being ignored.

**Figure 6.15: Proportion of fifth year students who experienced bullying**

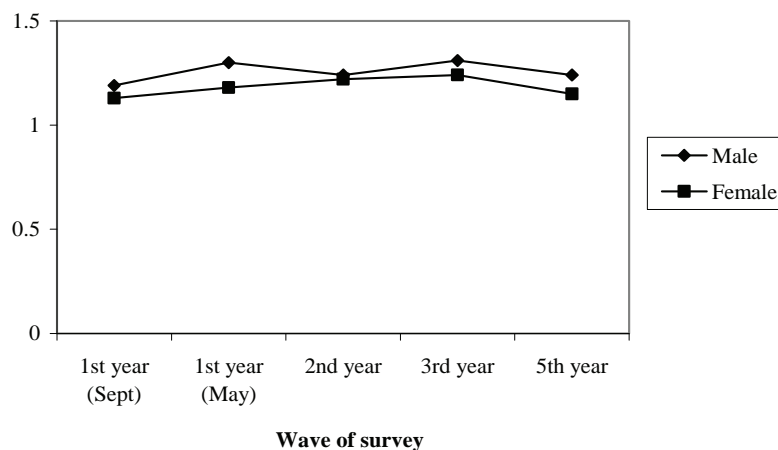


The different forms of bullying were combined into an overall bullying scale (with a reliability of 0.78). Overall, boys were more likely to report higher levels of being bullied than girls. In keeping with the patterns at junior cycle, newcomer students were more likely to report being bullied

than Irish students. There was also significant variation in bullying levels across the case-study schools, but the pattern did not vary systematically by the gender or social class mix of the school. There was no variation in the experience of bullying by Leaving Certificate programme or whether the student had previously taken Transition Year.

There was a significant decline between third year and fifth year in the proportion of students who reported being bullied (Figure 6.16). This was evident across all groups of students in terms of gender, taking Transition Year, Leaving Certificate programme and Junior Certificate performance. Placing this in the context of students' longer-term pathways, a slightly different pattern is evident for male and female students. Male students are more likely to report being bullied by the end of first year than earlier in the year; thereafter bullying levels oscillate somewhat with a decline between third and fifth year. For female students, bullying levels increase between the beginning of first year and third year and decline between third and fifth year.

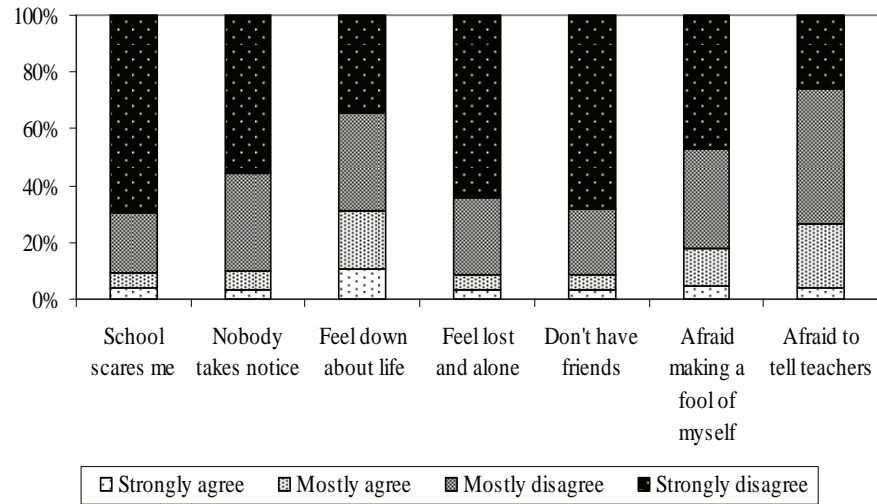
**Figure 6.16: Prevalence of being bullied by gender (10 schools)**



In terms of perceived popularity, the vast majority (88 per cent) of fifth year students consider that they are 'liked by most of the other students' in their class. Male students are somewhat more likely than female students to consider themselves unpopular, while Traveller students are

more likely to consider themselves unpopular than settled students (21 per cent doing so as opposed to 11 per cent). Perceived popularity is relatively stable between third and fifth year. However, there is a slight decline for those in predominantly working-class schools and a slight increase among newcomer students.

**Figure 6.17: Feelings of isolation and anxiety at school**



A measure of student isolation and anxiety was based on their responses to the following statements:

- Being at this school scares me.
- Nobody at this school seems to take any notice of me.
- At times I feel down about my life.
- I often feel lost and alone at school.
- I don't have many friends at this school.
- I'm afraid that I'll make a fool of myself in class.
- I am afraid to tell teachers when I don't understand something in class.

Just under a tenth of fifth year students reported marked feelings of isolation, feeling lost and alone at school, not having many friends, not feeling noticed and feeling scared (Figure 6.17). However, one in six students were afraid of making a fool of themselves in class and a quarter were afraid to tell the teacher if they did not understand something. Almost a third of students reported feeling down about their lives at times; feeling down was more common among female students (36 per cent compared with 25 per cent for males) and among newcomer students (50 per cent compared with 29 per cent for Irish students).

These responses were combined into an overall scale (with a reliability of 0.75). Feelings of isolation were more commonly reported by newcomer students but did not vary systematically by other student characteristics. There was some variation across the case-study schools in the level of isolation reported. Students who feel isolated have more negative views of school and of their teachers; they are less likely to have received positive feedback from teachers and more likely to have been reprimanded. They are also much more likely to have experienced bullying ( $r=+0.5$ ).

Feelings of isolation are relatively stable between third and fifth year. However, students who have taken Transition Year feel less isolated and anxious than they had in third year. Finding schoolwork the same or easier than in third year also contributes to reduced feelings of isolation.

In the group interviews, students were asked to reflect more generally on the relations among students in their year and class groups. Many students felt that they got on 'the same' with their fellow students during senior cycle, reporting no real differences or changes relating to their transition to fifth year. In terms of mixing, some students claimed that their friendship groups had not altered significantly since the start of secondary school, or even earlier.

*Interviewer:* And how do you find getting on, you have the other fifth year class that wouldn't have done Transition Year?

Grand.

*Interviewer:* Do you mix much?

Not a lot because you have your friends in fifth year and now we have these others coming in but like you get on with them, it's just not the same you know. We do get along though.

You would talk to them but like you wouldn't like sit beside them or anything, like be really pally with them.

You always stick to your own friends.

...

*Interviewer:* And are they the same friends you had since the start?

Yeah.

Since first year.

Yeah.

Since primary. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

Conversely, some students reported enjoying mixing with new people and making new friends: 'I think it's good because like you get to know different people and you make new friends' (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake). The junior cycle was much more restricted to class groups whereas senior cycle demanded more interaction with a broader range of people.

Last year you didn't know anybody besides the people in your class. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

You only really knew the people in your own class last year but now you've changed classes and there's different people in nearly every class. (Park Street, LCE, boys' school, mixed intake)

However, for some LCA students, improved relations with other students was a result of mixing less and getting to know their classmates more, owing to the structure of the LCA programme.

*Interviewer:* How are you getting on with the students?

Oh you get on better because you're in the same class with them all the time, you don't change around like you did in the last couple of years.

You've more time to get to know them, I didn't know any of these when I came into this year. (Dawson Street, LCA, coed school, mixed intake)

Other students reported not liking the enforced mixing required in fifth year, claiming it to be unsettling in terms of class dynamics.

I'd love to have my old class back.

...

*Interviewer:* Why is that?

Because I loved them.

...

No, you were settled with your own class, you knew everyone.

...

Felt comfortable like.

Yeah, exactly.

You could do anything and not have to look around you and see who's looking at you. (Argyle Street, LCE, coed school, mixed intake)

Some tried to ensure that they stayed with friends: 'classes were changing, you were being split from your friends, you were trying to pick the same subjects to stay the same but it didn't work' (Dawson Street, LCE).

In schools which operate an optional Transition Year programme, the merging of both those who participated in fourth year and those who progressed directly from junior to senior cycle often represented somewhat of a problem, albeit sometimes only on an initial basis.

We're in new classes with more people and we've made, I've made way more friends this year.



*Interviewer:* And how did that work out, going into a new class with people that had done Transition Year?

I was dreading it, I thought they were going to be all floating around the place, all giving each other hugs and I thought they were going to all be like that but they're grand. (Belmore Street, LCVP, girls' school, mixed intake)

They [the TY group] always hang out with each other.

...

It's not as obvious now as it was at the beginning of the year, at the beginning of the year it was all just oh there's the fourth years from last year, now you don't consider them that anymore. (Fig Lane, LCVP, coed school, middle-class intake)

Having taken Transition Year was seen as a significant factor in terms of how groups interacted during fifth year.

We did get on way better in fourth year.

Yeah I thought, and third year as well, it was just like a big group of people, now it's all like groups and it's like oh god look at her, whatever and that bores the bejeezus out of me.

I think it's mostly just the people that have skipped fourth year because they're immature.

Fourth year actually, I think, was good for people. (Fig Lane, LCE, coed school, middle-class intake)

However, after the broadening of social interactions during TY, some students reported that it was a situation of 'back to our own groups' in fifth year (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake).

Overall, a number of students reported less negative interaction, such as having arguments and fighting during fifth year, in keeping with the decline in the prevalence of bullying (see above).

Like all people still like bitch like you know, everyone does but I think people get on a lot better, there's less kind of like stupid fights between people, less petty, sort of ridiculous fights because everyone

is like grown up a bit. (Harris Street, LCE, girls' school, middle-class intake)

No one fights any more, like we used to have arguments, it's not like that now. Just all get along. (Barrack Street, LCE, girls' school, working-class intake)

Some students reported improved interaction with other pupils owing to the fact that other 'troublemakers' left school after the Junior Certificate.

After third year, because lads left the school which would cause problems.

Yeah, would cause problems in the class and they all left so it's kind of the whole class now is just better.

Yeah, everyone gets on in our year really, there's no real fighting or anything in our year so it's good. (Wattle Street, LCVP, boys' school, mixed intake)

In sum, relations among students appeared to have generally improved since junior cycle. However, the extent to which students made new friends in senior cycle varied across groups.

## **6.6 Conclusions**

This chapter has explored the influence of the transition to senior cycle on students' attitudes to school and relations with other students and teachers. Many key personnel in the case-study schools consider that students experience academic and social difficulties in making the transition to senior cycle. They single out the perceived gap in standards between junior and senior cycle as a core cause of such difficulties, with students experiencing increased academic demands on entry to fifth year. This period is also seen as coinciding with increased social pressures as students assume greater independence in their lives outside school.

The longitudinal nature of the data means that we can assess how students themselves change between third year and fifth year. As in junior cycle, fifth year students are generally positive about school and their teachers. However, attitudes to school are less positive than they had been in third year. Furthermore, students become less confident about

their capacity to cope with schoolwork, a pattern that appears to be associated with the perceived 'jump' in standards between junior and senior cycle (see Chapters Three and Four).

There is tentative evidence that taking part in the Leaving Certificate Applied programmes helps to re-engage some students in school life, in that this group are somewhat less likely to experience a decline in attitudes to school and are somewhat more confident about coping with schoolwork than previously. However, misbehaviour levels, including truancy, continue to be relatively high among this group of students, although somewhat lower than they had been in third year.

The level of both positive and negative interaction between teachers and students decreases over the transition to senior cycle. This is consistent with staff reports that they expect students to take more responsibility and with many student reports that they are treated more as adults by their teachers. There is also some improvement in the relations among students in fifth year compared with junior cycle, with a decline in the proportion who report being bullied.

## *Chapter Seven*

# CONCLUSIONS

This study examines the experiences of young people as they move from junior to senior cycle within post-primary education in Ireland, a transition that has been relatively neglected in international research. Analyses draw on quantitative and qualitative information on a cohort of almost 900 students in twelve case-study schools. This cohort of students has been studied since they entered first year of second-level education. The longitudinal nature of the data means that we can explore the extent to which young people change as they move into senior cycle and the degree to which their earlier experiences shape their later outcomes. This chapter outlines the main findings of the study and discusses the implications of these findings for policy development at both national and school level.

### **7.1 The Transition Year Programme**

Seven of the case-study schools in our sample provided the Transition Year (TY) programme, three of them on a compulsory (or quasi-compulsory) basis. The decision to have a compulsory TY programme was motivated by wanting the benefits to be available to all students but also by logistical constraints in the case of smaller schools, where it would have been difficult to provide alternative pathways for small numbers of students. Making the programme optional was mainly driven by the feeling among staff that the TY programme ‘is not for everyone’ and that different pathways are necessary to cater to diverse student needs and interests. Where TY was not provided at all, it was generally seen as unsuitable for the student intake because of the reluctance of stu-

dents in more disadvantaged areas to spend an extra year at school or because of the practical difficulties involved in providing a choice of routes for a small cohort of students.

Transition Year participants were found to differ from non-participants in a number of key respects. They were younger, more likely to have higher educational aspirations, had lower levels of misbehaviour at junior cycle and had achieved higher Junior Certificate grades. Students chose to take the TY programme in order to obtain a break from studying after the Junior Certificate exams, to experience different activities and trips, and to try out new subjects. Friendship groups also emerged as a factor in deciding whether or not to take TY. Non-participants attributed their reluctance to take TY to not wanting to spend an extra year in school. It is clear that, on the basis of these patterns, any benefits of TY will accrue to students who are fairly engaged in school life in the first place.

Differences were evident between the learning experiences of students taking TY and those going straight into fifth year, although the form taken by the TY programme varies from school to school (see Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). TY students tended to be more active participants in class work, engaging in group-work and project work on a more frequent basis as well as using computer and audio/video facilities more often. Work experience was also a core element of the Transition Year experience, while the extent of access to work experience in fifth year depended on the programme taken. In contrast, fifth year students were more likely to report teacher-dominated classes, with teachers doing most of the talking and reading from a book or working at the board. In general, TY participants reported less work pressure and improved relations with teachers compared with fifth year students.

Previous research had indicated positive perceptions of the programme among staff and students, who emphasised the benefits in terms of personal and social development as well as academic and broader learning outcomes (Jeffers, 2007; Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). The longitudinal nature of the current study allows us to go further than these cross-sectional studies by comparing student perceptions during and after taking the programme.

During Transition Year, the majority of students expressed satisfaction with the programme. Reasons for satisfaction tended to centre on the opportunity to try new subjects and activities, and the reduced workload compared with third year. Although this group of students was broadly positive, they sometimes tended to report that certain classes were 'boring'. Dissatisfaction levels tended to be higher in schools where TY was compulsory as well as among working-class students who took the programme. In the latter case, comments centred on TY being 'boring', a 'waste of time' and lacking variety. It would appear, therefore, that choosing to take TY involves a more active 'buy-in' to, and engagement with, the programme, in contrast to students, some of whom are already disengaged with school, who are required to take the programme.

Reflecting back on TY having entered fifth year, over three-quarters of students were glad they had taken the programme, with satisfaction levels even higher in schools with optional TY. Students emphasised that it was 'relaxing' because it provided a break from exam pressure and saw its benefits in terms of making new friends, learning to communicate well, increasing their self-confidence and participating in cultural/social activities. A number of students, although positive about TY, felt it hard to settle back into 'work' in fifth year, at least initially. Comparing TY participants and non-participants, some adjustment difficulties are evidenced by the slight increase in misbehaviour levels among TY participants between third and fifth year. On the other hand, those who had taken TY were less likely to feel isolated and anxious than they had in third year compared with other students. Furthermore, many students emphasised the benefits of taking TY in making more informed decisions about subject choice for the Leaving Certificate.

## **7.2 Leaving Certificate Programme Choice**

The case-study schools varied in the extent to which they provided the three Leaving Certificate programmes and in the choice processes involved. In three of the case-study schools, students did not have a choice of Leaving Certificate programme as only one programme was provided. In the other nine schools where more than one programme was on offer, parents were the most important source of advice in programme choice,

with subject teachers assuming an important role for many students. In relation to formal guidance provision, students differed in the amount of information and guidance they had received on the different programmes and in their satisfaction with their awareness of the different options.

Among the cohort of young people in this study, over two-thirds went into Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), a quarter into the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme (LCVP) and 6 per cent into the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. There is considerable overlap in the profile of students taking LCE and LCVP, with both programmes drawing on students from a range of backgrounds. In terms of the motivation for taking particular programmes, LCE was seen as providing access to a wider range of post-school education and employment opportunities while the potential for 'extra points' and work experience emerged as attractions for the LCVP programme.

A marked difference is evident between LCE and LCVP students on the one hand and LCA students on the other in terms of their social profile and educational history. Entry to LCA is strongly differentiated by social class background, with working-class students and those from non-employed households most likely to take the programme. In contrast, those from professional or farming backgrounds are very unlikely to take the LCA programme. Students who had lower reading scores on entry to secondary school, those allocated to lower stream classes and those who had received learning support are more likely to take LCA. Those entering LCA have higher levels of prior misbehaviour, are particularly unlikely to have degree-level aspirations and tend to have received lower Junior Certificate grades. It is clear that the Leaving Certificate Applied programme is therefore taken by the 'at risk' young people at whom it is aimed. However, it should be noted that by no means all (or even the majority) of these groups across the case-study schools take LCA.

### **7.3 Subject Choice**

The vast majority of students had a choice of Leaving Certificate subjects, although those taking LCA were less likely to be offered such a choice. Students reported a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for

choosing subjects, emphasising interest in and liking a subject but also requirements for later education, training and employment. As with programme choice, students were highly reliant on their parents in making their subject choices. Around half also mentioned that subject teachers played an important role. As with programme choice, formal guidance concerning subject choice differed from school to school, with varying emphasis on whole-class information sessions as opposed to one-to-one appointments with the guidance counsellor. TY students generally had the opportunity to sample Leaving Certificate-style subjects and take guidance courses or modules as part of the programme, thus facilitating later choices. Overall, many students were happy with the information they had received but others felt ill-informed as to the consequences of their choices for later educational and employment opportunities. In addition, many fifth year students reported a lack of awareness of the course content and demands of specific Leaving Certificate subjects.

Differences in subject take-up are evident across groups of students. Gender differences are evident in the take-up of Biology, Physics, technological subjects, Home Economics, Art/Music and French. Higher performing students are more likely to go on to take Physics, Chemistry and French than other students. Having taken related subjects at junior cycle along with the attitudes formed to particular subject areas influences Leaving Certificate subject take-up. Thus, students are more inclined to take subjects that they have found interesting, not difficult and useful at junior cycle level.

#### **7.4 Access to Subject Levels**

The case-study schools were found to vary in the degree, timing and flexibility with which students were allocated to different subject levels in fifth year. As at junior cycle, choice of subject levels reflects the interaction between school policy, teacher expectations and student preferences. Detailed information was collected on the level taken in Irish, English and Maths. The strongest influences on taking higher level within fifth year related to prior choices at, and performance within, junior cycle. Thus, students are unlikely to move 'upward' from ordinary level Maths at Junior Certificate to higher level Maths at Leaving Cer-



tificate, in keeping with previous research (see Millar and Kelly, 1999). Furthermore, prior academic performance, in terms of the grade achieved at Junior Certificate level, is predictive of level take-up at senior cycle, even controlling for junior cycle subject level.

The prior choices at junior cycle largely explain gender and social class differences in higher level take-up within fifth year as well as the lower likelihood of students in working-class schools taking higher level. Because of the close connection between class allocation and subject level taken, students who had been in lower streamed classes at junior cycle are very unlikely to access higher level at senior cycle level. The attitudes formed to subjects also play a part, with the perceived difficulty of Irish and Maths as early as first year forming a barrier to later take-up. Taking Transition Year is associated with a much greater likelihood of taking higher level English, controlling for prior achievement and background. However, no such difference is evident for Irish and Maths.

### **7.5 Learning Experiences**

As well as differing in their profile, the LCA and LCE/LCVP groups differed in their learning experiences. LCA students reported more frequent use of active learning methods, including group-work, project work, and use of computer and audio/video equipment. In contrast, LCE and LCVP reported more teacher-dominated lessons in fifth year and a greater emphasis on homework.

Compared with third year, the majority of LCE and LCVP students found schoolwork harder in fifth year with a significant proportion spending more time on homework and study than they had previously. In contrast, LCA students found schoolwork easier than previously and were spending less time on homework outside school.

The majority of fifth year students were satisfied with their Leaving Certificate programme, with slightly higher dissatisfaction levels found among LCE and LCVP students compared to those taking LCA. Reasons for dissatisfaction centred on lack of awareness of programme content in advance, the perceived gap in standards between junior and senior cycle (see below), and the nature of relations with teachers.

In terms of attitudes to subjects, over half of fifth year students find the languages, Maths and Home Economics difficult in fifth year. Interestingly, the perceived difficulty of English increases between third and fifth year, reflecting the gap in standards mentioned by many students. Students are more likely to find a subject difficult if they are taking it at higher level. Levels of student interest were higher for the 'optional' subjects, especially History, Biology and Home Economics, but lower for the languages (including English) and Maths. Levels of interest in Irish, English and Maths fall off somewhat between third and fifth year. Students in fifth year were most likely to consider Biology, Home Economics and Math useful, and least likely to consider Irish useful.

### **7.6 The Transition to Senior Cycle**

Key personnel reported that students experienced at least temporary difficulties in making the transition from junior to senior cycle. Such difficulties largely centred on the gap in standards and demands between the Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes. Factors outside school, such as leading more active social lives and involvement in part-time work, were also seen as contributing to the adjustment process.

In keeping with staff reports, LCE and LCVP students tended to report increasing demands between junior and senior cycle, with schoolwork becoming harder and more investment in homework required. This was especially evident for students taking subjects at higher level. Even subjects like English, which had been seen as relatively easy at junior cycle, were increasingly seen as difficult. As a result of these demands, students become less confident about their capacity to cope with schoolwork and become less positive about school in general. On the positive side, students appear to be given more responsibility over their learning at senior cycle with more 'adult' relations with teachers.

There is tentative evidence that the transition to senior cycle is quite different for LCA students. They tend to find schoolwork easier, with a greater emphasis on within-class work rather than homework outside school. Consequently, taking part in LCA appears to re-engage some students in school life. However, some students mentioned a lack of

challenge within LCA, an issue which was evident in a broader study of the programme (see Banks et al., 2010).

### **7.7 Issues for Policy Development**

The structure and nature of senior cycle education has been the subject of policy discussion in recent years. A document on senior cycle education from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2002) pointed to a number of potential options for change, framed in terms of a new school culture, a restructured learning experience, a re-balanced curriculum and different assessment arrangements. Further issues around the content and structure of the curriculum as well as assessment and certification were raised by stakeholders in the ensuing consultative process (NCCA, 2003). The subsequent period has seen the development of new subjects, transition units and work on the development of key skills and flexible learning profiles. *Towards Learning* (NCCA, 2011a) proposes a range of curriculum components (subjects, short courses and transition units) which will facilitate choice and flexibility, with ‘appropriate guidance and support ... necessary to enable learners to make wise and informed personal, educational and career choices’ (p. 7).

Discussions of senior cycle education have been paralleled by debate about junior cycle reform (see NCCA, 2011b). The study findings clearly point to the crucial role played by student experiences at junior cycle in shaping their later pathways and outcomes. The subjects students take for the Junior Certificate, and their experiences of those subjects, strongly influence the subjects they will select on entry to senior cycle. Similarly, the levels at which they take subjects shape their later opportunities to access higher level subjects within senior cycle. Gender and social class differences in the take-up of higher level subjects at senior cycle are largely due to students’ earlier choices.

These patterns have a number of implications for practice at the school level. Firstly, the nature of subject choice at junior cycle varies from school to school. In schools where students are required to choose subjects before the chance to sample them, they know less about the content of those subjects and may be unaware of the longer-term conse-

quences of their choices. An earlier phase of the study found that first year students were generally more positive about the sampling approach and did not experience any of the negative impact on their academic progress thought to result from subject overload (Smyth et al., 2004). Schools should therefore be encouraged to provide a subject sampling system for part or all of first year, and supported in so doing. Secondly, students should be encouraged as far as possible to pursue junior cycle subjects at higher level and flexible approaches to ability grouping used to support this process. Otherwise, the interaction of school policy and student choice may mean that some students, particularly those in working-class schools and/or lower stream classes, are hindered from pursuing certain post-school education and career pathways. Thirdly, the findings have implications for guidance provision since the importance of early choices highlights the need to provide guidance on the choice of subjects and subject levels at an earlier stage.

Guidance provision relating to the choice of programmes and subjects at senior cycle varies across the case-study schools in its timing, in the emphasis on whole-class information sessions or one-to-one appointments with the guidance counsellor, and in the kind of information provided to parents (see Byrne and Smyth, 2011, for further detail on parents' perspectives). Students themselves point to the need for more information on the content of subjects since, in many cases, Leaving Certificate subjects turned out to be very different to what they had expected. Furthermore, students were not always clear that failing to choose certain subjects could restrict the options open to them at a later stage. In the context of current guidance resources, much of the guidance counsellor's time is devoted to the sixth year classes and/or to dealing with significant personal problems among students (see McCoy et al., 2006). A whole-school approach to guidance which encompasses students at all stages of their schooling career is likely to better support student choice. Furthermore, a whole-school approach is all the more important given that young people rely on their subject teachers for advice on the content of subjects and often on the subject levels they should take.

The transition to senior cycle involves a period of adjustment for students. In particular, students taking the Leaving Certificate Estab-

lished or Leaving Certificate Vocational programmes report a 'gap' in standards between junior and senior cycle, with an escalation in workload on entry to fifth year as well as more complex course materials and modes of assessment. Key personnel also point to the discontinuity in the standards expected at junior and senior cycle, so it is clear that the 'step up' required is not a matter of student perception alone. This pattern points to the need to examine the extent of continuity between related subjects at junior and senior cycle. The provision of more precise information on the detailed content of subjects would also help students to make more informed decisions about the subjects they select. Given that some students are limited by the prior choices they made at junior cycle, attention should be paid to whether students can be facilitated in taking up subject areas for the first time at senior cycle. Many students report difficulties with higher level subjects, with some dropping down from higher to ordinary level because of course demands. There would appear to be a need for greater transparency in what is involved in the different subject levels so that students have realistic expectations of the related demands.

It is evident that the kinds of learning experiences which students access depend on the programme they take, which, in turn, depends on the school they attend. Students taking Transition Year experience more active teaching and learning methods and have access to a broader range of subjects and activities. The TY programme also demonstrates the potential for the design and development of courses and materials at the school level. There is a tension, however, in trying to offer the benefits of TY to the whole cohort of students, since, in keeping with previous research (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004), students in schools where the programme is compulsory appear to be less satisfied with the programme. In addition, staff in working-class schools report a potential conflict between providing TY to their students and retaining them to the end of senior cycle.

Students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme also experience more active learning methods, which help to re-engage some students with schoolwork, while those taking LCE or LCVP report more teacher-dominated classroom settings and a workload which causes difficulty for many. While young people are broadly positive about the

methods used in LCA, they raise concerns about the lack of challenge, constrained access to certain post-school pathways and the stigma which comes from being identified as taking a recognisably 'different' programme (Banks et al., 2010). Allowing students to pursue more flexible pathways, combining different sets of courses at a varying pace, may provide a way of minimising such stigma while maximising students' options for the future. Finally, the study findings clearly point to a need for the adoption of more active teaching and learning approaches across the whole range of senior cycle programmes in order to enhance student engagement.

This study has examined the transition from junior to senior cycle and student experiences of the first year of their Leaving Certificate programme. The way in which this transition shapes Leaving Certificate performance and plans for the future is discussed in a companion volume (Smyth, Banks and Calvert, 2011). Taken together, the two reports provide crucial insights for policy development concerning senior cycle education.

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*Choices and Challenges* explores the experiences of young people moving from junior to senior cycle education. It looks at how student learning experiences and relations with teachers and peers change over this important transition. It examines how students choose among Leaving Certificate programmes, subject and subject levels, placing these decisions in the context of their junior cycle experiences.

The book is part of a series about the lives of young people as they move through the schooling system and provides an important evidence base for discussions about senior cycle reform. It should be of interest to principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, policymakers, parents, teacher educators, and the wider academic community.

