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Adolescents' educational attainment and school experiences in contemporary Ireland

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Adolescents' Educational Attainment and School Experiences in Contemporary Ireland

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Adolescents' Educational Attainment and School Experiences in Contemporary Ireland

Introduction

In recent decades, contemporary industrialised societies have undergone substantial social and economic changes. Ireland is no exception. The economic boom since the 1990s has resulted in rising living standards within families and a reshaping of the boundaries between work and school for young people. Teenagers have been given more autonomy within the family and increasing freedom in their social lives (Smyth et al. forthcoming). Young people in Ireland now actively participate in the labour market – the majority of young people in Irish secondary schools are now engaged in part-time paid employment during term-time (McCoy and Smyth, 2004).

These changes have taken place in Ireland over a relatively short period of time. However, the majority of young people have adjusted well despite the fact that formal educational structures have not generally changed to reflect this wider social transformation. Despite this, the number of high school (senior cycle) graduates has remained high at over 80 per cent and increasing numbers of students continue their education in higher education. While a small proportion of young people still leave school prematurely without any formal qualifications, the majority of Irish students tend to have positive attitudes toward school.

Personal and social problems are addressed by providing holistic support to students through guidance and pastoral care provision at the school level. However, it is important to mention that there is a variation at school level with regard to the extent to which support is provided. In addition, the different needs of secondary school students are catered for by a variety of state-funded programmes to tackle educational disadvantage. Students can now also choose between three different types of qualifications at upper secondary level. The Leaving Certificate Established Programme is a two-year programme, traditionally academic in focus and taken by the majority of the student cohort. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) was introduced

in 1994 and aims at bridging the gap between the more academic Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and vocational education. Students take at least five Leaving Certificate subjects as well as three Link Modules – Enterprise Education, Preparation for Work and Work Experience. The Leaving Certificate Applied Programme was introduced in 1995. Its goal is to prepare students for the transition from school to adult and working life, including further education. This option is meant for students who do not want to enter directly to third level education. The students participating in this programme are assessed on the basis of tasks rather than examinations.

The paper focuses on school experiences among Irish secondary school students. In Ireland, secondary education is compulsory up to the age of 16 or up to the end of Junior Cycle (lower secondary education), whichever occurs last. Primary and secondary education levels constitute two separate sectors of formal schooling. One secondary school (schools are within the voluntary secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive sectors)¹ can have several feeder primary schools. Lower secondary school in Ireland is called the Junior Cycle and covers years one to three. At the end of their third year, at the age of fifteen, pupils sit for the Junior Certificate exams; these state exams constitute the minimum educational qualification that pupils are expected to attain. After this stage, pupils proceed to the Senior Cycle, which lasts two to three years.

The paper presents results from two major studies carried out in Ireland. First, in order to provide background information, it uses data from a national survey of school leavers. Such data has been collected in Ireland on a regular basis since the 1980s and includes a comprehensive set of questions about participants' socio-economic characteristics. More detailed information about young people's school experiences is drawn from a mixed methods longitudinal study of lower and upper secondary school students. In particular, the paper draws on the first phase of the study which aimed to explore students' experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school. In line with Coleman (1988), this study highlights the importance of social capital (both school and family based) on student outcomes. According to Coleman, resources that facilitate the well-being and development of children are borne of the relationships between actors.

¹ All four secondary school sectors in Ireland exist within a common curriculum and assessment framework. However, the sectors differ in their formal management and funding structures. They also differ informally in the socio-economic and ability profile of their students.

In other words, relationships and the quality of interaction between a child, school and family have an impact on child's educational attainment.

The paper begins by providing an overview of the data and methodology used in the study. The following sections of the paper present the main results and conclusions.

Data and Methodology

The paper draws on two sets of data. First, in order to provide background to the paper, data from the Annual School Leavers' Survey are used. School Leavers' Surveys have been carried out in Ireland since the early 1980s. They capture the experiences of young people as they leave school and provide valuable insights into their early post-school experiences in further education, training or the labour market. The surveys include all those leaving secondary education during the course of an academic year and are nationally representative of the population of school leavers. As well as including those who completed their secondary schooling, the surveys also include those who left school early – either leaving at lower secondary level or prior to completion of upper secondary. Respondents are asked detailed questions about their experiences while at school. This retrospective information forms the focus of analysis in this paper. Among the issues examined are school leavers' levels of satisfaction with their school experiences and the extent to which they feel their education has prepared them for life after school. The analysis is based on the 2004 School Leavers' Survey, which captures those who left school during the 2002/03 academic year.

In addition, the study uses a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. In particular, triangulation was employed for identifying students' experiences in secondary school. An exploratory approach was considered most suitable for the purposes of the study as it gives priority to the quantitative data that is collected first, followed by the collection of qualitative data. Utilising a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods benefited the study in many ways. Firstly, data from questionnaires provided an overall picture of students' experiences, with issues followed up in more detail in the group interviews with students. Secondly, interviews with the key

personnel in the case study schools enabled the authors to tap into rich information about school policy and process

Quantitative data was collected from lower secondary school principals using a postal survey. There was a high response rate (78%) to the postal survey, achieved by an extensive follow-up procedure involving reminder letters and phone calls.

Based on the information provided by the postal surveys of school principals, 12 case study schools were chosen - the schools were a purposive sample, designed to capture key dimensions of school organisation and process (such as ability grouping, approach to subject choice and social integration of students). Thereafter, qualitative information was collected to refine the results. For the latter, semi-structured interviews were used to explore school personnel and pupils' perceptions of their experiences in secondary school.

The following section of this paper provides a discussion of the research findings.

Research findings: School Leavers' Survey

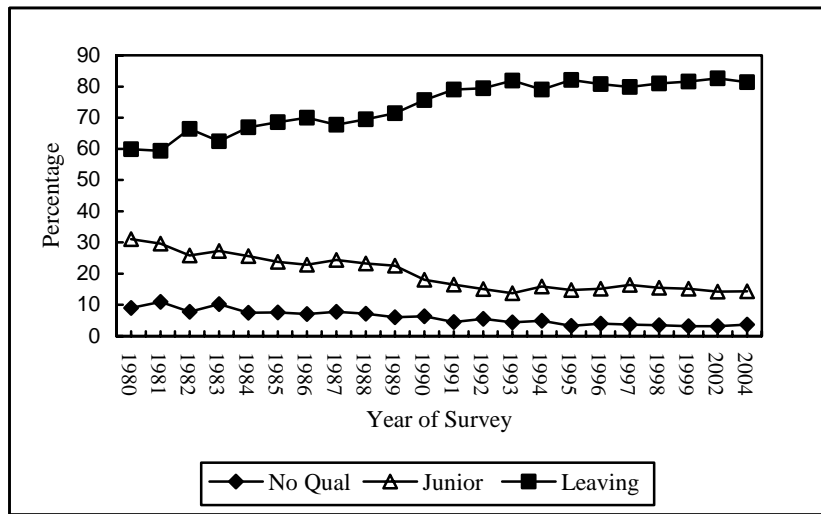
Educational attainment over time

The level of educational attainment among young people in Ireland has risen in recent decades. Due to changed labour market demands and a rise in credentialism, more students leave secondary school with the Leaving Certificate qualification which is, in many cases, the minimum requirement for obtaining a job. In addition, increasingly a larger percentage of students continue their education at higher education and the points that they get in the Leaving Certificate exams determine whether they will be able to study the desired subject. The relatively high level of educational attainment among Irish school-leavers is partially driven by a rising demand for skilled workers within the changed labour market.

Figure 1 illustrates longer-term trends in the qualification levels of school leavers since 1980. One can see from the graph that the percentage of those leaving school without the Leaving Certificate has fallen steadily. In 1980, 9 per cent of students left with no qualifications and 31 per cent left after the Junior Cycle (lower secondary). By

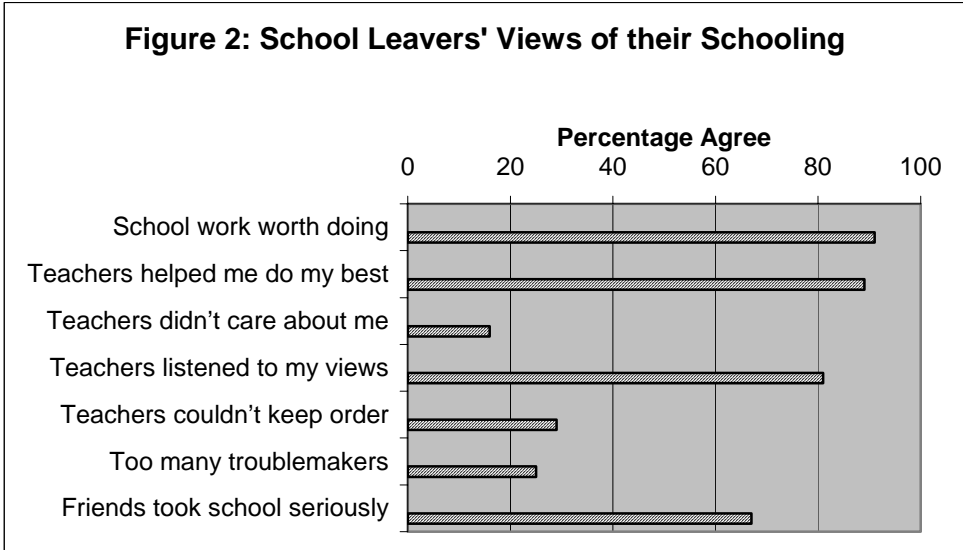
2004 the corresponding figures had dropped to less than 4 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively, so that the proportion leaving school with the Leaving Certificate had risen from 60 per cent to 82 per cent. The percentage of school leavers with the Leaving Certificate has remained relatively stable at 79-82 per cent since 1991.

Figure 1: Qualification Level of School Leavers

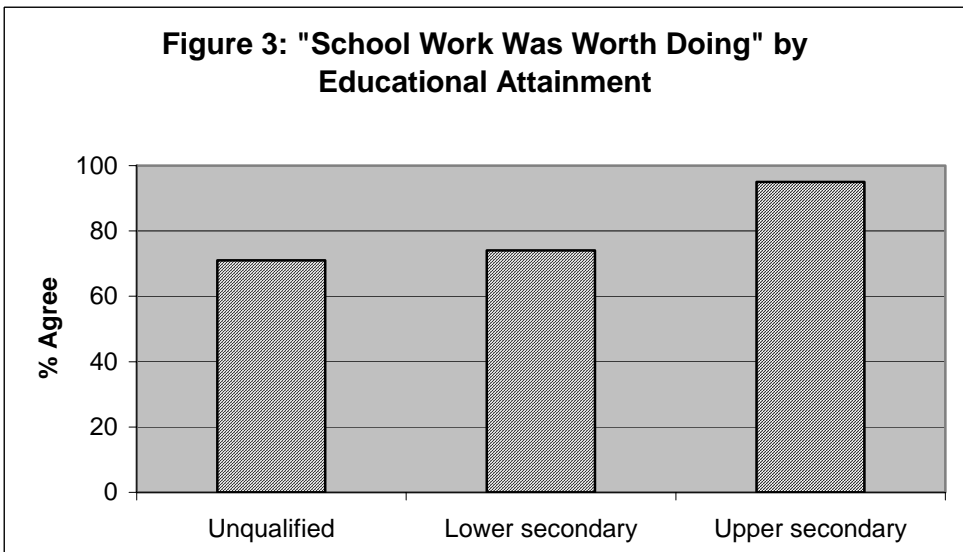


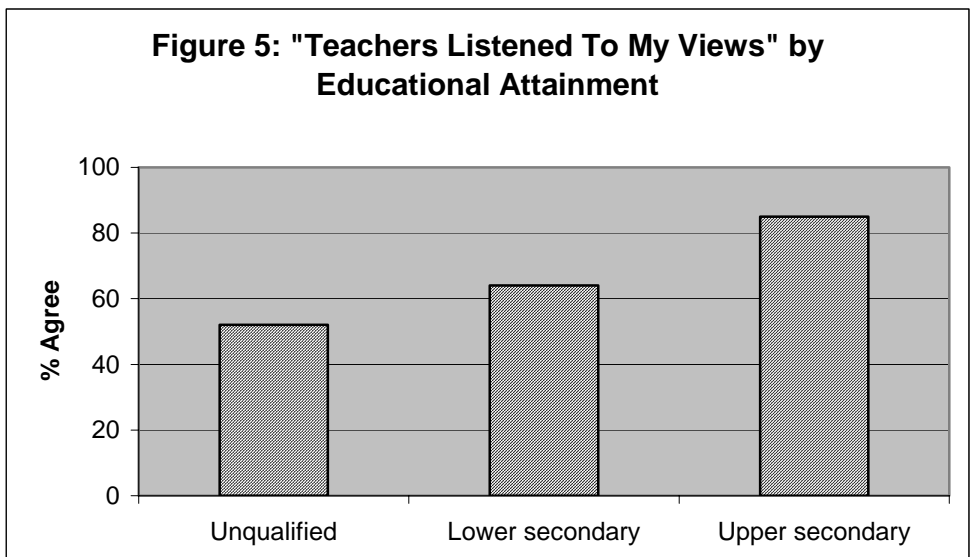
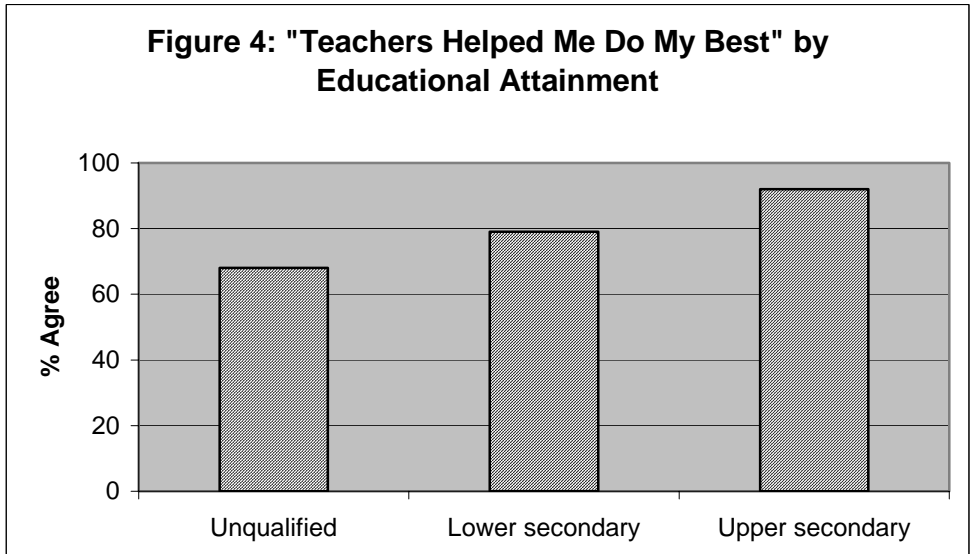
Experiences at School: National Picture

School leavers were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements about their schooling and, for the most part, their responses are positive. Figure 2 illustrates that over 90 per cent of respondents feel that their school work had been worth doing. Their views of their teachers were similarly positive – 90 per cent feel that teachers helped them to do their best and 81 per cent indicate that teachers had listened to their views, while just 16 per cent feel that their teachers didn’t care about them. Two-thirds of all school leavers maintain that their friends took school seriously. However, when we look at variations in respondents’ perceptions and experiences of schooling, we find important variations across students, particularly between those who completed their secondary schooling and those who did not.



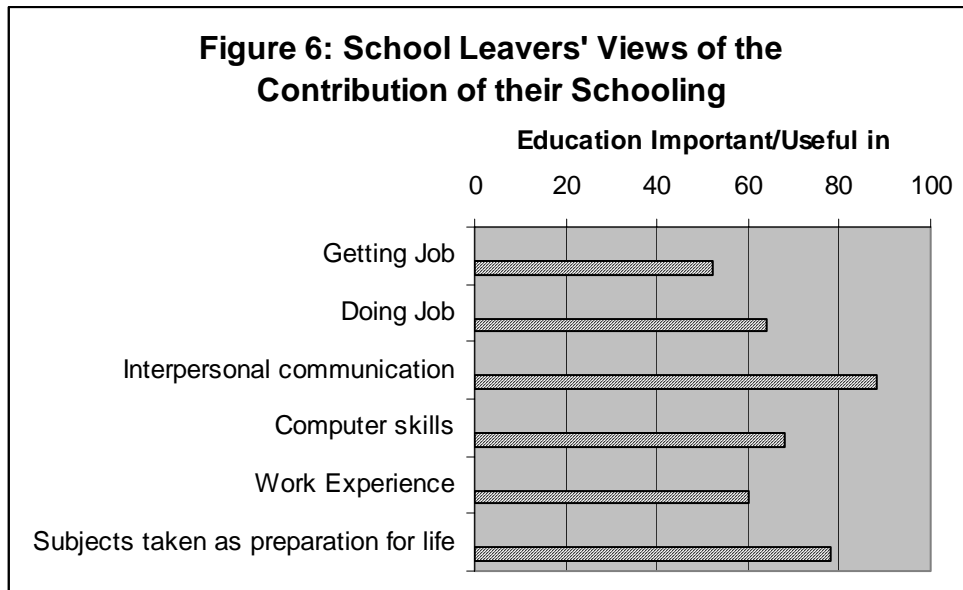
Figures 3 to 5 illustrate that those who completed their secondary school have more positive views of their schooling than those who left early. While 95 per cent of those who completed school feel that their school work was worth doing, just 70 per cent of those who left prior to completion of lower secondary school expressed similar views. While 85 per cent of those who completed school feel that teachers had listened to their views, just half of those who dropped out were similarly positive (Figure 4).





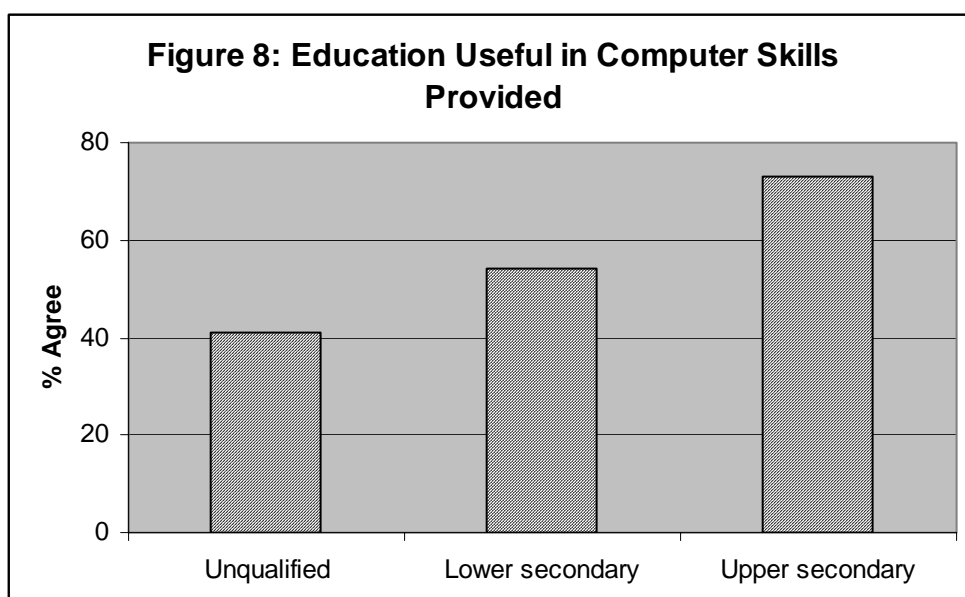
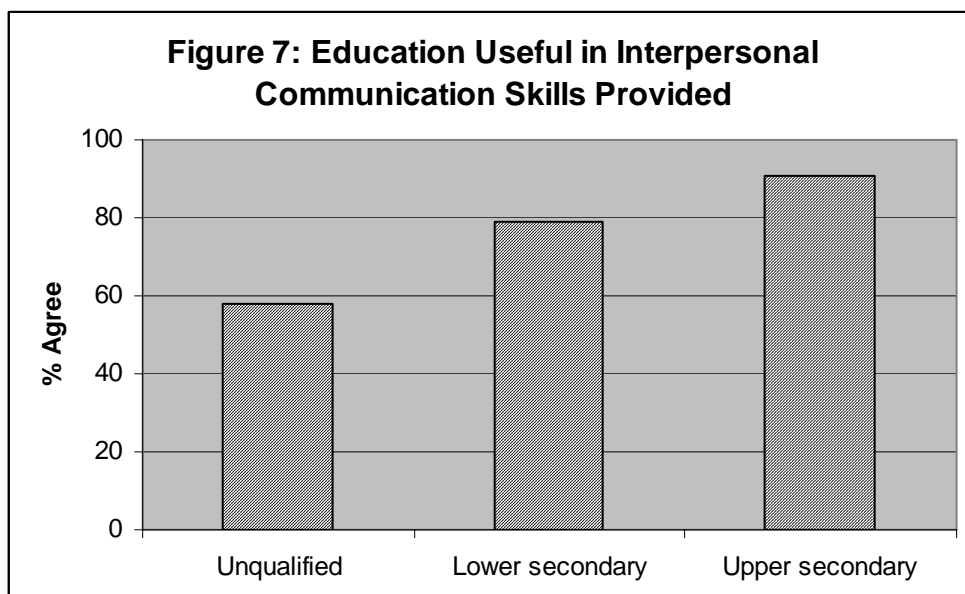
School leavers were also asked about the extent to which they felt their education had been useful in getting a job and in carrying out their current work (for those who were in the labour market). They were also asked to assess whether their education had been useful in developing interpersonal communication skills, computer skills and work experience and had been useful in the subjects it had provided in preparation for life skills. Again the picture that emerges is one of general satisfaction. Overall, 88 per cent felt their education had been useful in developing interpersonal communication skills, 68 per cent in developing computer skills, 60 per cent in terms of work experience and 78

per cent feel that their education had been useful in the subjects they had taken as preparation for life skills. Respondents were less positive in terms of the direct value of their education in accessing employment and carrying out their work, but given that the vast majority of school leavers were not actually in the labour market at the time of the survey, and had progressed to some form of post-school education or training, this finding is based on a small subset of school leavers.



When we examine the extent to which views vary across students with different levels of attainment, we again see less positive views among those who left school early. While over 90 per cent of those who achieved the Leaving Certificate exam (the terminal secondary exam) consider their education to have been useful in developing interpersonal skills, this is the case for less than 60 per cent of those who dropped out prior to upper secondary. Likewise just 43 per cent of those who left prior to upper secondary value their education in terms of the computer skills provided, relative to nearly three-quarters of those who completed school.

It is also interesting to note that males are less likely to rate their school experiences positively and while to a large extent this reflects male over-representation among school dropouts, even among those who complete their secondary schooling, females are slightly more likely to be positive about their schooling.



While the results portray a picture of general satisfaction with school among young people in Ireland, the findings hide some important variations among young people. Most notably, the 20 per cent of young people who leave school early (prior to completion of upper secondary), many of whom are male, are less upbeat in their evaluations of their school experiences and are less positive in terms of the contribution of their educational experiences to their lives since leaving school.

While the previous sections described the national pattern among young people in

Ireland, drawing on a large-scale survey, the following sections of this paper are based on a mixed method longitudinal study of students' experiences in secondary school. This study involves more detailed information collected from 12 case study schools.

Research Findings: Mixed methods longitudinal study

Analyses of the School Leavers' Survey data allow us to explore the attitudes and experiences of a nationally representative sample of young people. However, the data have some limitations: firstly, information on attitudes to school is collected retrospectively and so young people's views of school may be coloured by their subsequent experiences; and secondly, the data do not allow us to place young people's experiences within the detailed school context. In order to explore the potential impact of school policy and process on young people's educational experiences, this section draws on a mixed methods longitudinal study of secondary school students. Analyses draw in particular on the first wave of the study, that is, on young people's initial experiences of entry into secondary school.

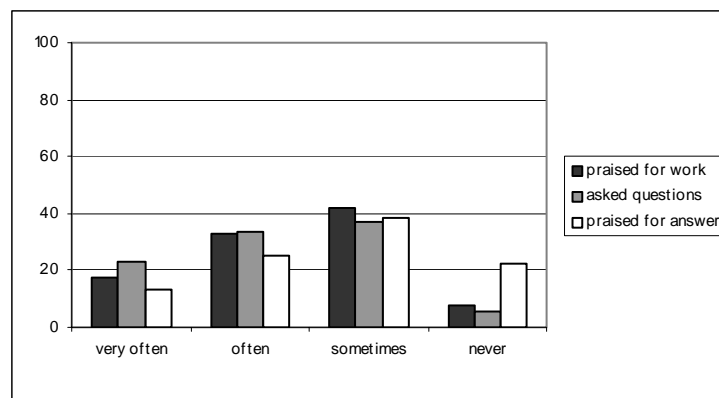
Teacher-Student Interaction

Teachers are seen to have an important role to fulfil as a source of social capital (see Croninger and Lee, 2001) and in supporting students' adjustment at school (see Demetriou, et al., 2000). School has a strong socialising effect on students as they spend a substantial amount of time of their day in school (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). In addition, a number of international studies stress the importance of teacher support to students in the transition process (Hargreaves and Tickle, 1980; Gutman and Midgley, 2000; Smyth, et al., 2004). It can be argued that the extent and nature of this interaction may affect students' perceptions of the school in general, an issue which is explored below. In this study students were asked about the extent to which they had experienced different types of interaction with teachers in secondary school. These responses were broadly divided into positive and negative teacher-student interaction categories.

(a) Positive Teacher-Student Interaction

Positive teacher-student interaction was based on the extent to which students had been told (very often or often) that their schoolwork was good by a teacher, had asked questions in class and had been praised for an answer. The analysis showed that over half of Irish first year students had asked questions in class often or very often and around half had been told their work was good by a teacher often or very often (see Figure 9). Only a very small number of Irish children reported never having been told that their schoolwork is good by a teacher (7 per cent) while 6 per cent had never asked questions in class. However, almost a quarter of the cohort had not received praise from their teacher for an answer in class. The prevalence of positive interaction between teachers and students varied across the case-study schools.

Figure 9: Reports of Positive Teacher-Student Interaction



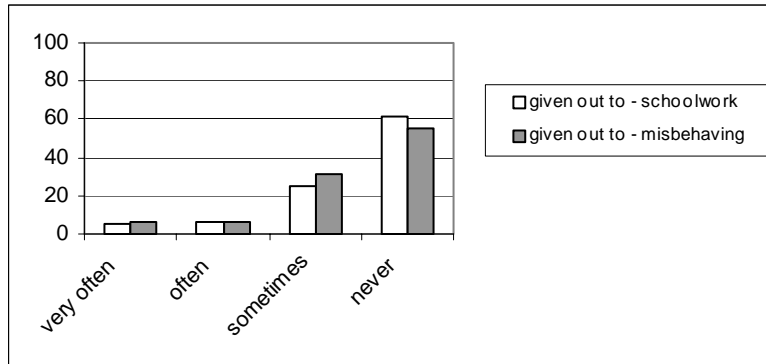
(b) Negative Teacher-Student Interaction

This measure was also based on students' reports of interaction with teachers in the weeks before the survey took place. In general, only a minority of Irish students had been criticised frequently for their work (12 per cent) or for misbehaving at school (13 per cent) while over a quarter had been criticised by teachers 'sometimes' (see Figure 10). As with positive interaction, the prevalence of negative interaction varied across the case-study schools.

In general, Irish first year girls in lower secondary schools experienced less negative interaction compared with boys. Student-teacher interaction seemed to be linked

to students' academic image; students who reported having been at the bottom of the class academically in primary school were more likely to be reprimanded, and less likely to be praised, by teachers on entry to secondary school.

Figure 10: Negative Teacher-Student Interaction



The impact of student-teacher interaction on the adjustment process is discussed by Demetriou et al. (2000). The authors maintain that negative interaction with teachers as well as negative labelling have a detrimental impact on students' sense of themselves as learners. Subsequently those students may start to disengage as 'wearing the badge with honour' becomes one way of coping with the situation. Elsewhere, teachers are also seen to have lower expectations of students from lower social class backgrounds; this may become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the latter in terms of resorting to non-academic activities (see Rist, 1970).

Interaction with peers

In addition to student-teacher relationships, peer-group interaction is important in shaping students' experiences in school. The transition from one level of schooling into another generally causes disruption to established friendship patterns if, as often occurs, students move to different secondary schools (Lord et al., 1994). This factor is especially important as peer groups tend to assume a more notable role in the lives of adolescents (Gutman and Midgley, 2000; Erikson, 1967). The main causes of anxieties that students report at the time are fear of being bullied by other students, along with changes in friendships and relations with teachers (Smyth, et al., 2004). Lucey and Reay (2000) and

Naughton (2000) suggest that students' conceptions of secondary school are also greatly influenced by the 'urban myths' about 'rites of passage' associated with the move.

(a) Inter-Relationship with Peers

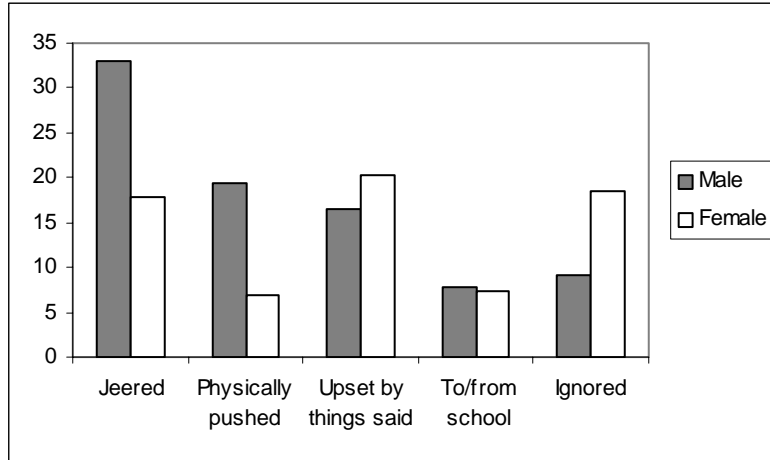
Irish students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements concerning relationships with friends and peers in general. The students were asked if they missed friends from last year, whether they got any attention at school, if they felt alone in the school, if they had many friends in the school and whether they were liked by their peers. The analysis showed that in Ireland a notable proportion (32%) of students reported missing friends from their primary school. In other areas the overall majority of students were positive about their interaction with peers. However, 4 per cent of the students surveyed 'strongly agreed' that nobody took any notice of them and 5 per cent often felt lost and alone in school. The opinion of other students was relevant to 12 per cent of the students who 'strongly agreed' with being afraid of making a fool of themselves in class with 19 per cent reporting 'mostly agree'. A high proportion of students reported being liked by most other students in their class. Irish girls were more likely than boys to miss their primary school friends; in other areas of interaction there were no notable gender differences.

(b) Bullying

Interaction with other students in the school is also relevant to the ease with which students negotiate their position in a new school setting. One of the biggest potential obstacles to this adjustment is being bullied at school. Irish students participating in the study were asked about their experience of being bullied in secondary school. Certain gender differences could be identified in experiencing bullying. The most common form of bullying reported by boys was being jeered by other students while among girls, being upset by things said behind their back, being jeered or being ignored were equally common forms of bullying. Compared to Irish girls, boys reported more frequently being mocked or physically pushed around while girls were more likely to report being ignored or being upset by gossip about them (see Figure 11). The analysis of the Irish data showed that over 15 per cent of boys in their first year of secondary school were

physically pushed around by other students. It should be noted that schools are not the only places where bullying takes place. A small number of Irish students also experienced being pushed around on the way to or from school.

Figure 11: Experience of Being Bullied by Gender (% one or more times)



This seems to suggest that there are certain gender differences in the type of bullying that takes place in schools in line with other similar research in the Irish context (see O’Moore 1995). The authors indicate that boys are more likely to be bullies either in groups or individually. This study found that Irish girls tended to utilise more subtle ways of bullying other students resorting to gossip and ignoring the students they did not like. Boys, on the other hand, tended to be more physical as well as using direct verbal insults. Similar findings were also presented by Smyth (1999) in the Irish context.

Students’ perspectives about school

As part of the study, secondary school students were presented with a set of statements about different aspects of their school life. On the basis of their responses, a number of different dimensions of school-related attitudes could be distinguished².

1. The extent to which students reported liking school life (alpha of 0.7771);
2. The extent to which students reported liking their teachers (alpha of 0.7284);

² Factor analysis in SPSS software was used to analyse the interrelationships among the different statements.

3. Academic self-image, that is, the extent to which students felt they could cope with school-work (alpha of 0.7579);
4. Exclusion/ disengagement, that is, the extent to which students felt isolated in their new school and consequently anxious about their situation (alpha of 0.7546).

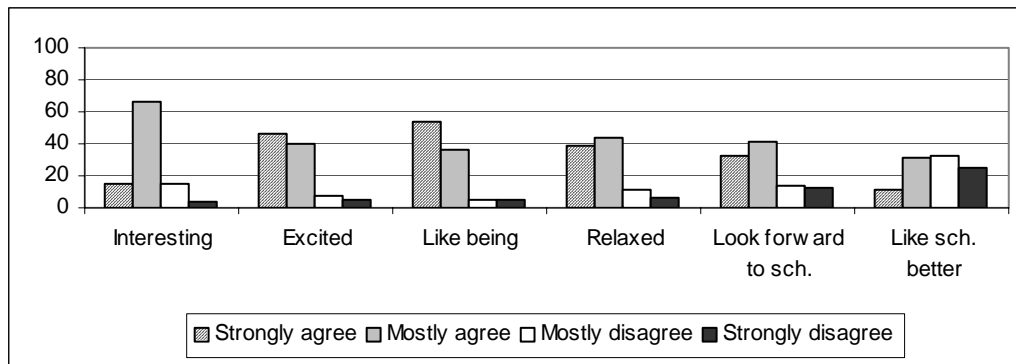
The extent to which students were considered to like school was derived on the basis of the following statements identified from the factor analysis:³

- I find school-work 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.

In general, Irish students tend to have fairly positive attitudes towards school at the beginning of the first year of their secondary education (see Figure 12). Over half like being in the school (strongly agree) and many report that they are excited and relaxed about school. However, a small proportion of students neither find schoolwork interesting nor like being at school. A similar sized group do not feel relaxed about school, do not look forward to coming to school and do not like school better than other students in their class. Interaction with their secondary school teachers has a significant influence on their attitudes to school; students who have experienced positive interaction with teachers are more likely to report liking school while the opposite is the case for levels of negative interaction.

³ The scale derived is highly reliable (0.7771).

Figure 12: Extent to Which Students Like School: Ireland



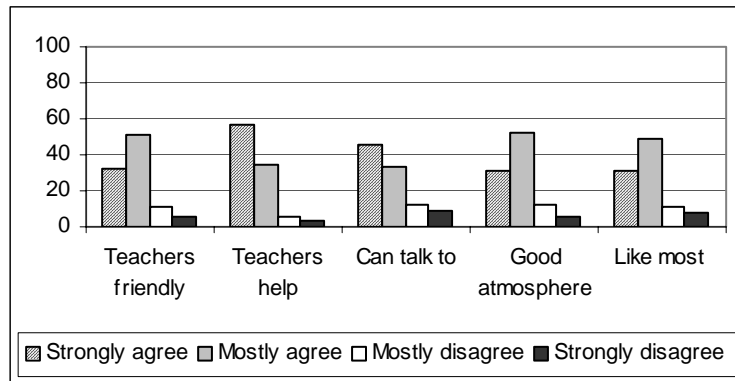
The measure of liking teachers was based on the following statements:⁴

- I think most of my teachers are friendly.
- My teachers would help me if I had a problem with my school work.
- 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.

Most Irish students are found to have positive feelings regarding their teachers at the early stages of secondary school. Figure 13 indicates that first year students generally also have positive views of their teachers: they generally find teachers helpful, approachable, friendly and find that there is a good atmosphere in the classroom most of the time. However, one can distinguish a group of students who do not find teachers easy to talk to— this may indicate conflicts between the personalities of students and teachers.

⁴ The scale has a reliability of 0.7284.

Figure 13: Extent to Which Students Like Teachers in Their School: Ireland



Students who reported higher parental involvement were also more likely to report liking teachers⁵. As might be expected, students who report liking school and were doing well in primary school (top of the class) are also likely to report liking teachers. In addition, students who experienced positive interaction with teachers in secondary school are more likely to report liking teachers in their school while the opposite is the case for levels of negative interaction.

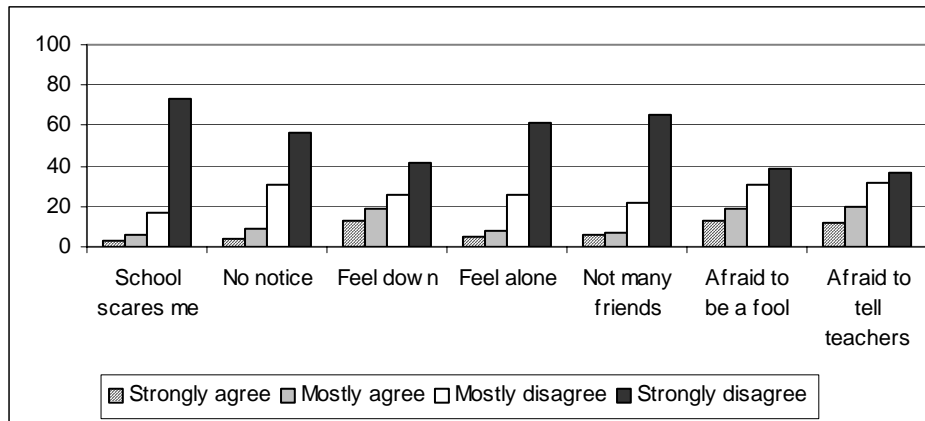
While a majority of Irish students felt positive about school and their academic success, there were some who experienced isolation and general disengagement from school. In Ireland, this measure was based on the following statements that emerged from the factor analysis:⁶

- 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.

⁵ Liking school is positively associated with parental involvement and is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

⁶ The measure has a reliability of 0.7603.

Figure 14: Exclusion/ Disengagement at School: Ireland



These statements show that a minority of Irish students report feeling excluded at school: they report feeling alone, without friends, being scared by school or being ignored by other students and teachers (see Figure 14). Almost a third of students are afraid to make a fool of themselves in class and are afraid to ask teachers if they don't understand something. In addition, almost a third of the students surveyed reported feeling down about their life at times. The results reflect students' sensitivity to the opinion of other students and the teachers. Feeling sensitive about their life and other students' opinion may reflect the volatile nature of adolescence (Ross and Brok, 2000). Girls were somewhat more likely to report feelings of isolation than boys; this pattern corresponds to the study by Anderson, et al., (2000) who found girls to be more vulnerable to environmental and biological stressors within adolescence. The only exception in the Irish study was Palmerston Crescent School⁷ where the girls appeared to be more confident than in other schools. There was some variation by social class background with those from working class and non-employed households more likely to report feeling isolated within school than those from other social classes.

In addition, students from a Travelling Community background⁸ or with immigrant parents⁹ were more likely to report feeling isolated within school. Students

⁷ Palmerston Crescent School is a fee-paying school, mostly middle-class intake.

⁸ Travellers are a culturally and socially distinct group within Irish society. The term 'traveller' refers to their nomadic background.

⁹ The number of immigrant students in Irish schools is on increase, presenting its own problems in terms of adjustment to the Irish educational system in general (Devine, 2005).

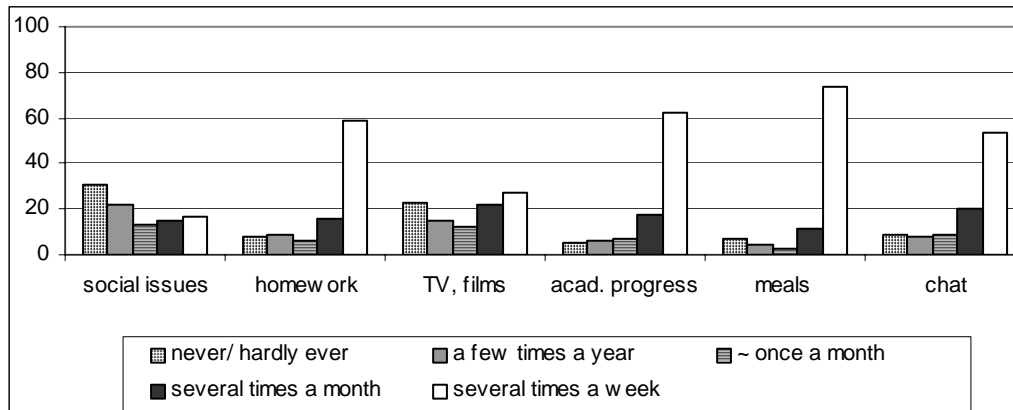
with higher levels of parental involvement¹⁰ were less likely to report feeling isolated at school indicating the importance of parental involvement at this key stage (see Mizelle and Irvin, 2000).

Home Support and Levels of Parental Involvement

Home is a source of social capital, attitudes, dispositions and confidence. Home support is considered to be a very important factor in helping students not only to settle in a new school (Mizelle and Irvin, 2000) but in shaping dispositions towards education in general (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). This study asked Irish students a set of questions about parental involvement including: discussing political or social issues (such as what is on the news) with their parents, their parents checking that they have done their homework, discussing TV programmes or films with their parents, discussing how they are getting on at school, eating dinner with their parents around the table, and spending time chatting with their parents. Students were asked to indicate whether these events never or hardly ever occurred, happened a few times a year, about once a month, several times a month, several times a week. Most Irish parents frequently check on the homework and academic progress of their children, have meals together and generally chat with them. Irish parents are less likely, however, to talk about social issues with their children or discuss films and television programmes (see Figure 15). A minority of parents have very little involvement across all the areas of contact. Not surprisingly, these students tended to feel more vulnerable during the transition to secondary school.

¹⁰ The association between feelings of isolation/ disengagement and parental involvement was negative and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

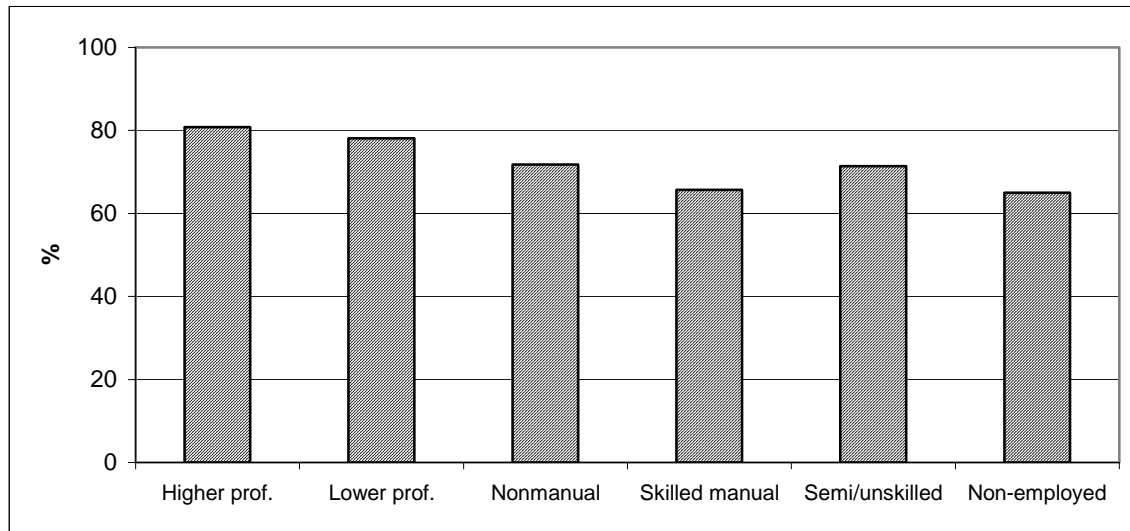
Figure 15: Parental Involvement in Ireland



In general, parental involvement in Ireland was positively associated with positive dispositions towards school, including liking school and having good relationships with teachers. Students with higher level of parental involvement were less likely to feel exclusion/ disengagement and experience negative interactions with teachers. Parents of female students seemed to be particularly involved in different aspects of their children’s lives.

Another area where parents are heavily involved is school choice. School choice constitutes an important decision for many Irish families in terms of the future of their children. The results of this study show that most families are actively involved in the selection process. Forty-five per cent of students report that they and their parents had actively selected the school they attended, that is, that there was another school closer to their home. Almost three-quarters of the students reported that their parents had discussed the choice of secondary school with them. The pattern of choice in Ireland differs by social class (see Figure 16) with parents from professional backgrounds more likely to discuss this issue with their children than those from unskilled/manual backgrounds, in line with other studies in the Irish context (see Lynch and Lodge, 2002).

Figure 16: Frequency of Parents Discussing School Choice With Students



Conclusions

This paper explores the secondary school experiences of young people in Ireland. A nationally representative survey of school leavers indicates that most young people are positive about their school experiences and their teachers. They generally see their schooling as having contributed to their personal and social development, enhancing their communication and life skills. These positive responses are most prevalent among those who have proved fairly successful within the school system, that is, the four-fifths of the student cohort who remain in school to obtain upper secondary qualifications. Attitudes are found to be more negative among those who left school early, with school drop-out most likely associated with their negative experiences of school.

A mixed methods longitudinal study of secondary school students yields additional insights into the processes shaping these views of schools by allowing us to explore the relationship between school experiences and attitudes in greater detail. Student experiences at school are influenced by a number of factors including the quality of social relationships at school, potentially a source of social capital. Generally, students in the first year of secondary school are positive about school and their teachers; with the exception of a small minority, Irish students find school an exciting place to be, they feel relaxed about school and look forward to going to school every day. Students are more

positive about school and their teachers where they have received positive support and feedback from their teachers within the class context. Conversely, frequent negative interaction with teachers appears to result in low self-esteem and disengagement on the part of the student. Thus, students who had less positive interaction with teachers (in terms of never being praised and/or frequently reprimanded) also had more negative perceptions of the school and teachers in general. In line with other studies (see Demetriou et al., 2000), it can be concluded that the nature of interaction with teachers has an impact on the development of student orientations to schooling.

Second, the relationship with peers during and after entry into a new learning environment cannot be underestimated. In Ireland, many schools facilitate the settling-in process by including at least one friend in the same class group when students come to the new school. In time, however, students make new friends and are less dependent on the ones from primary school. However, peer relationships may also have a certain downside. Exploring the issue of bullying, it was evident that this action takes many forms. A significant minority of students reported being jeered at, physically pushed around, being upset by the things said about them, being ignored by other students and being bullied on their way to/from school. These students experienced more difficulties settling into school and were more likely to feel isolated or anxious.

Third, several international studies highlight the importance of parental involvement in their child's schooling. Levels of parental involvement are found to be significant in shaping Irish students' experiences at school. Students whose parents were more involved in their academic and social lives were more likely to have positive feelings about school and teachers, have a higher academic self-image and were less likely to experience exclusion/ disengagement.

In conclusion, media discussion of young people often focuses on issues such as binge-drinking, drug abuse, self-harm and suicide. However, in spite of rapid economic and social change in the Irish context, young people are found to be generally positive about their day to day lives in school. These experiences are facilitated by generally positive relationships with their parents, teachers and peers. However, it should be noted that, in spite of a number of interventions to counter school drop-out, a significant minority of Irish young people have a more negative experience of school and thus do

not fully benefit from the educational system. The challenge in policy terms is to enhance the experiences of this group by providing teacher and peer support at the school level.

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