Emer Smyth

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES ON SECONDARY EDUCATION

Institutions, Transitions and Policy

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To my mother, Jean, for all she taught me

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This book explores the experiences of young people as they move through the Irish secondary educational system. Drawing on a rich study which combines survey data with in-depth interviews with students, it addresses the key facets of schooling which influence young people's experiences. The book is organised thematically, providing an exploration of central dimensions of school structure and process, including ability grouping, school climate and the impact of high-stakes examinations. Placing young people's voice centre stage, it explores how they respond to the school context and make decisions that will profoundly affect their future. Contrasting different types of school settings, the book examines the way in which gender and social class play out at the school level. The book emphasises both features which are common to other educational systems (such as ability grouping and high-stakes examinations) and those which are specific to the Irish context.

This chapter places the current study in the context of previous research on school experiences, particularly work that has emphasised the value of student voice and studies that have explored social inequalities in educational processes and outcomes. The chapter then goes on to provide an overview of the study methodology before outlining the content of the book.

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Locating the Study

There is a large body of research literature on school experiences from the perspectives of principals, teachers, parents and students. While this research provides an important backdrop for the current research, the study is primarily located within two strands of work: that emphasising student voice and that exploring educational inequality.

Student Voice

In educational discourse, there has been an increasing focus on the value of taking account of 'student voice', that is, in regarding young people as key informants whose perspectives can contribute to improving the way in which school organisation and teaching are organised. This focus has its roots in a broader concern with the notion of children's rights (Archard, 2014) but is also located within a research tradition on student perspectives on school which dates from the 1960s onwards (see e.g. Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Mortimore et al., 1988; Rutter et al., 1979). These latter studies have yielded important insights into variation in student engagement with learning as well as the social dynamics of the school. The attention to student voice has been given further impetus by two parallel developments—the emergence of the school improvement movement (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007) and work from critical theorists who have highlighted the way in which young people's voices have been 'silenced' in the context of unequal power relations within schools as well as society more generally (Fine and Weis, 2003). Researchers within the school improvement tradition have emphasised the way in which student views of teaching and learning can be harnessed, through student councils and/or consultative processes at the classroom level, in order to bring about changes that enhance young people's commitment to learning (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000). Levin (2000) points to normative and pragmatic reasons for paying attention to student voice. Normative reasons relate to the importance of recognising the rights of children and young people to be heard, while pragmatic reasons centre on the importance of student buy-in, their possession of unique knowledge of the conditions for learning and the factors which trigger their disengagement, and their role as 'producers' of educational outcomes. At the same time, even among commentators who emphasise student voice, there can be differences in the extent to which young people's accounts

are privileged over those of teachers and school principals. Some researchers have suggested, for example, that young people may not contribute as much to discussions of the curriculum as to other aspects of teaching and learning; students, it is argued, can comment on 'bits and pieces' of curriculum content rather than taking a holistic view of what kinds of knowledge are or should be valued (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000).

There have been a number of qualitative studies in which researchers have sought to utilise student perspectives in order to bring about change within the school (Robinson and Taylor, 2007, 2012; Pomar and Pinya, 2015; Zion, 2009). These studies have shown that young people are rarely consulted about reform efforts in their school and generally feel that they have little or no input into decision-making (Zion, 2009). They highlight a number of common features which children and young people see as enhancing their learning, including challenge, relevance, variety, support, respect, fairness and autonomy (Kershner, 1996; Levin, 2000; Rudduck et al., 1996).

While a number of researchers writing about student voice acknowledge the presence of unequal power relations between teachers and students and even among students from different social backgrounds (see e.g. Robinson and Taylor, 2007), commentators do not always acknowledge the way in which young people's contribution to school improvement is fundamentally constrained by this inequality (Arnot and Reay, 2007). In consultative initiatives, 'good' students tend to be chosen for participation by staff, and these young people may not feel able to voice concerns which are directly challenging to the status quo in the school (Noyles, 2005; Robinson and Taylor, 2012). Thus, some young people may be listened to more than others, and student voice may be permitted only within certain comfort zones. This book seeks to privilege young people's own accounts of their school experiences and the aspects of teaching and learning which they wish to change. While doing so, the analyses recognise, and indeed seek to unpack, the way in which students' ability to have a say in aspects of schooling that affect them are constrained by unequal power relations between teachers and students.

Educational Inequality

Inequality in the participation and achievement levels of different social classes has been a dominant theme within the sociology of education (see e.g. Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Shavit et al., 2007). Explanations for

the patterns found can broadly be characterised as those which emphasise rational choice and those which emphasise social (or socio-cultural) reproduction. From a rational choice perspective, educational choices (such as how long to remain in full-time education or which pathways to take) are seen as reflecting an assessment of the relative costs and benefits attached to different options (such as higher education [HE] or labour market entry), costs and benefits which differ by social class (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). Thus, middle-class young people seek to maintain the class position of their parents and stay on in education to achieve this goal while their working-class peers tend to pursue shorter vocational routes which are seen as less risky options in terms of the potential of failure. The assumption made in this theoretical framework is that the decisions taken are rational but little attention has been given to the kind of information used by young people in evaluating competing options. The theme of how young people weigh up different educational choices and the kinds of advice and support they utilise in this process forms a central facet of the current study.

Social reproduction theorists (such as Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) focus, in contrast, on the way in which different economic, cultural and social capitals are possessed by different social classes and the resulting formation of different dispositions (habituses) to learning. Social class differences in resources result in a greater mismatch between the cultures of home and school for working-class children while the educational achievement of middle-class children is enhanced by their family's engagement in high cultural activities and use of the modes of expression valued in school (see e.g. Lareau, 2003). Neither theoretical framework devotes much attention to the potential impact of school experience on these processes. Rational choice theorists tend to view the school as a 'black box', focusing instead on the weighing of options and decisions made by parents and children rather than examining whether schools influence this decision-making process. In contrast, a central focus of the current study is the way in which schools can influence the kinds of pathways open to young people and the kinds of information they are provided with in making educational choices. Bourdieu's theory has been extended to allow for the effects of 'institutional habitus', for example, the academic climate of the school as embedded in school practices, on post-school choices (McDonough, 1997; Reay et al., 2001, 2005). The concept of institutional habitus is drawn on in the current study, particularly in looking at young people's intentions to go on to HE. However, other aspects of school organisation

and process are found to impact on student experiences and outcomes, and these are not reducible to the way in which class is expressed in the school habitus. Thus, the analyses point to the complexity of policy implementation at the school level (see Ball et al., 2012).

A further potential difficulty with these two frameworks relates to the role of young people's agency, that is, the extent to which they are 'free' to make decisions about and pursue their own pathways. Rational choice theorists tend to emphasise the family as a coherent unit and do not always recognise that parents and young people may have divergent views about, for example, early school leaving (see e.g. Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Furthermore, while recognising that decisions are made within a certain social context, the extent to which this context constrains goals and actions is not always evident. On the other hand, social reproduction theorists, especially Bourdieu, have been criticised for being overly deterministic (Jenkins, 2002), for assuming that young people's destinations follow more or less automatically from their social class of origin, although Reay (2004) argues that Bourdieu's perspective allows for the role of both habitus and agency. The debate about the relative role of structure and agency is, of course, pervasive within the discipline of sociology (see e.g. Elder-Vass, 2010). The analyses in this book not only seek to explore the influence of structure on young people's experiences but also, in keeping with the student voice perspective, examine the extent to which they are active, albeit constrained, agents in their own development. Perhaps a useful concept from this perspective is Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) concept of 'bounded agency', whereby young people 'are neither dopes nor pawns' but make 'pragmatically rational decisions' in the context of the limitations ('horizons for action') set by their environment at home and school. These young people make decisions which are 'partially rational' but are also influenced by emotions and feelings. From this perspective, decisions about, for example, post-school pathways are embedded in the family background, culture and life histories of young people. The remainder of this book seeks to look at how such decisions are embedded not only in family background but also in school context, providing concrete examples of the bounded agency of young people.

Rational choice and social reproduction theory have been criticised for neglecting the role of gender in shaping school engagement and achievement. Recent decades have seen a shift in the policy discussion of gender and education away from a focus on female disadvantage towards a concern with male underachievement, and a wide variety of explanations have been

advanced to explain this pattern (see Francis and Skelton, 2005, for a useful overview). It has been argued that the increase in female educational attainment can be seen as a response to broader social changes in women's labour market and political participation (Arnot et al., 1999; Baker and Jones, 1993). A number of studies have indicated that gender differences in academic performance are, at least in part, related to the nature of assessment used, with a reliance on coursework seen as favouring girls (Sukhnandan et al., 2000; Elwood, 1999). The extent to which changes in the mode of student assessment is responsible for a trend towards male underachievement has been the subject of much debate, at least in Britain (for contrasting views, see Gorard 2004; Arnot and Miles, 2005). Other explanations have emphasised gender differences in classroom interaction patterns, teacher expectations and the culture of laddishness. There is considerable evidence that boys are more disruptive in the classroom and experience more negative interaction with teachers as a result of their misbehaviour (Francis, 2000; Warrington and Younger, 2000). Some studies have suggested that teachers construct underachievement differentially by gender, emphasising lack of confidence among girls but poor behaviour and motivation among boys (Jones and Myhill, 2004). Perhaps the most prominent explanation for the underachievement of boys in the current debate, at least in the British context, is a culture of laddishness (see Epstein et al., 1998). Lower academic grades among boys are seen as reflecting a culture of disaffection, poor behaviour and identification with a masculine identity based on non-school activities, such as sport (see e.g. Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Francis, 2000). For boys, it is not seen as acceptable among their peers to be interested in academic work; they are instead concerned with preserving an image of reluctant involvement or disengagement (Younger and Warrington, 1996; Tinklin et al., 2001).

Increased attention has been paid to the interaction of gender with ethnicity and social class (Duru-Bellat et al., 2003). From this perspective, certain groups of boys rather than all boys perform poorly, indicating the need to move beyond oppositional categories of 'male' and 'female' (Cortis and Neumarch, 2000). Findings have been inconsistent about the extent to which any gender gap is greater for particular social groups. Some commentators have argued that the gap in performance is greater for working-class than middle-class students (Duru-Bellat et al., 2003; Arnot and Miles, 2005) while others have found little systematic variation across social classes (Connolly, 2006). The analyses presented in this book look at the way in which social class and gender both shape student engagement in schoolwork.

In spite of a large body of work on class and gender inequality in educational participation and outcomes, these approaches have generally not examined the extent to which unequal power relations between adults and children/young people cross-cut these inequalities (for an exception, see Devine, 2003, on primary school children). Thus, it will be argued later in the book, all students, middle-class and working-class, female and male, may experience constraints on their agency because of their framing as 'children' within the school setting.

This book seeks to explore some of the ways in which social class and gender shape the experiences of young people within the school system, recognising that they are active agents in their own lives but that this agency is bounded by structures within and outside the school context. In addition, it examines the way in which all young people, especially older teenagers, are in a contradictory position as they lead increasingly adult lives outside school but are constructed as 'children' or, at best, 'child-adults' within school. In tracing these influences, the analyses not only emphasise common features which apply across different educational systems (such as the role of ability grouping and the influence of high-stakes examinations) but also seek to relate student experiences to the specificities of the system and school within which they are located. The following section outlines some of the key features of the Irish educational system which shape student experiences in general and the nature of inequalities in particular.

The Irish Educational System

Chapter 2 discusses the trajectories young people take through the Irish educational system in greater detail but here it is worth highlighting some dimensions which are of particular importance in understanding the context for the study. These dimensions include the impact of school choice, the combination of a highly centralised system side-by-side with considerable school discretion over some aspects of organisation and practice, and the high-stakes nature of the examination system.

School Choice

Some countries, including England and the USA, have seen an increasing proliferation of school types in an effort to provide competition in the education 'market' (see e.g. Berends, 2015; Gorard, 2014). In contrast,

in Ireland the existence of a number of different school types has its origins in the historical development of the schooling system rather than a conscious policy attempt to promote parental choice. The role of parents in education also has a constitutional basis (Coolahan, 1981), with the Constitution of Ireland (Government of Ireland, 1937) acknowledging parents as the primary educators of their children:

> The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children. (Article 42.1)

The freedom of parents to choose a particular type of education for their children was also given a constitutional basis:

> Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.
>
> The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State. (Articles 42.2 and 42.3.1)

There are three types of secondary school in Ireland: voluntary secondary schools, vocational schools (or community colleges) and community/comprehensive schools. Voluntary secondary schools were set up by religious orders or Church dioceses and, in a small number of cases, by individuals (Coolahan, 1981). In recent years, religious congregations have gradually withdrawn from the management of schools, in some cases, handing them over to trust bodies designed to preserve their religious ethos. While mostly Catholic in ethos, there are also a number of Church of Ireland schools as well as one Methodist, one Quaker and one Jewish secondary school. Initially, voluntary secondary schools were geared towards the provision of a more academic curriculum and, until the 1960s, were open only to students whose families who could pay student fees or who were in receipt of scholarships. Vocational schools were introduced in the 1930s to provide an education largely geared towards preparation for manual occupations in contrast to the more academic orientation of voluntary secondary schools. Community/comprehensive schools were introduced from the 1960s in an effort to bridge the gap between the

more academic voluntary secondary schools and trade-oriented vocational schools. However, this did not amount to anything approaching a comprehensivisation of the system and the sector has remained small in size. From 1967, all secondary education was made freely available to young people, although around 8% of schools have remained outside this 'free scheme' and operate as fee-paying schools.

Another important feature of the Irish educational landscape is the persistence of a considerable number of single-sex schools. These schools are largely, but not solely, confined to the voluntary secondary sector. Currently (in the school year 2014–15, the latest year for which data are available), a third of all secondary schools are single-sex in character. Girls are slightly more likely to attend single-sex schools than boys, with 36% of girls doing so compared with 33 % of boys (Department of Education and Skills, 2015a). This represents a reduction in the gender disparity since 2000–1 when there was a gender gap of 10 percentage points in attendance levels at single-sex schools (Department of Education and Science, 2002). Parental preference for single-sex schooling for their daughters is rooted in a public discourse that girls' schools 'do better' academically, though systematic research shows little difference in student outcomes by school gender mix, once the social and ability profile of students is taken into account (Hannan et al., 1996b).

While the different categories of school evolved from a distinctive historical context (see above), and have different ownership and management structures, they are largely State funded, follow the same State-prescribed curriculum and prepare students for the same State public examinations. Despite this common curriculum framework, the historical legacy of the different school sectors continues to act as a factor in school choice. In contrast to other countries, the degree of competition between schools in the Irish context has not been given much attention. A survey of lower secondary students indicated that almost half were not attending their nearest or most accessible school (Hannan et al., 1996b). In the context of relatively low population density in Ireland with consequent dispersion of school provision in some parts of the country, this finding indicates quite a remarkable degree of active selection of schools on the part of parents and children. Parental choice of school is structured by social class with those from higher professional groups making more active selections than those from other groups. School selection processes have accentuated differences in composition between school sectors and among individual schools. Vocational schools have continued to attract a higher proportion

of pupils from working-class and unemployed backgrounds, while a disproportionate number of middle-class pupils attend voluntary secondary schools (Hannan et al., 1996b; Williams et al., forthcoming).

Social segregation between school sectors and among individual schools has important implications for the persistence of social class inequalities in educational outcomes. Students who attend schools with a high intake of young people from working-class backgrounds are more likely to drop out of school before the end of upper secondary education, and tend to underperform in State examinations, compared to those in other schools, an effect which operates over and above that of individual social background (Smyth, 1999). In addition, the social profile of the school contributes to the embedding of a certain institutional habitus in school processes, such as the approach to career guidance, resulting in between-school variation in the proportion of students going on to HE (Smyth and Hannan, 2007).

Centralisation and School Discretion

The Irish educational system represents a specific combination of a highly centralised, standardised system with a significant degree of discretion in policy and practice at the school level. The Department of Education and Skills sets the general regulations for the recognition of schools, prescribes curricula (with the advice of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment), establishes regulations for the management, resourcing and staffing of schools, and centrally negotiates teachers' salary scales. Examinations at the end of lower and upper secondary education are set and marked by the State Examinations Commission. Alongside this strongly centralised and standardised system, there exists a considerable degree of discretion in policy and practice at the school level, variation which may result in very different educational experiences for young people. Schools differ significantly in their approach to ability grouping, degree of subject choice, level of student and parental involvement, disciplinary climate, nature of student–teacher interaction and academic climate (Smyth, 1999). All of these aspects of school policy and practice have important consequences for educational participation and attainment and thus for potential inequalities in educational outcomes.

Another feature of the standardised nature of schooling in Ireland is the relatively undifferentiated nature of the system. The Irish educational system focuses on the provision of 'general' education rather than tailoring curricula to specific occupational niches (Hannan et al., 1996a). The

introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, which seeks to foster pre-vocational rather than vocationally specific skills, has resulted in some differentiation at upper secondary level but only a small proportion of the student cohort (5–6%) take this programme. In spite of these changes, the Irish system remains quite distinct from the highly differentiated systems of vocational education in Germany and the Netherlands (Hannan et al., 1996a). Educational outcomes are, however, highly differentiated in terms of the stage at which young people leave school, the level of courses they take and the grades they receive.

High-Stakes Examinations

Ireland is an interesting case study of the prominence of high-stakes examinations and their backwash effect on school processes. Young people take two sets of standardised exams: the Junior Certificate, at the end of lower secondary education, and the Leaving Certificate, at the end of upper secondary education. The Junior Certificate was initially 'high stakes' because of its influence on the pathways of young people who left school early. As the majority of students now go on to complete upper secondary education, it cannot be regarded as 'high stakes' in the same way. However, grades achieved in the exam can influence access to subjects and subject levels within upper secondary education. Leaving Certificate qualifications represent an important gateway to post-school opportunities; 'points' based on grades and subject levels are used to determine access to HE and employers pay attention to grades in making recruitment decisions, especially in times of recession (Breen et al., 1995; Smyth, 2008; Smyth and McCoy, 2009). As a result, this high-stakes exam receives a good deal of policy and public attention and assumes a central importance within the educational system itself.

Study Methodology

The Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (hereafter the PPLS) began life as a study of transitions into secondary education commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) but subsequently expanded into a longitudinal study which followed young people throughout their secondary schooling. As in many other systems, there were policy concerns about potential discontinuity in curriculum between the primary and secondary levels as well as about young people's

academic and social adjustment to the new school setting. However, there had been an absence of research on this topic in the Irish context, and the research study was therefore designed to explore the nature of this transition.

Many studies of the transition process have focused on tracking a group of students identified in the final year of primary education into secondary school (see e.g. Hargreaves and Galton, 2002 on the English context). However, the concern in this study was with the impact of (variation in) the way in which secondary schools managed the transfer and learning process on student experiences of first year. Such a study required that we capture the important dimensions of variation among secondary schools (e.g. the prevalence of integration programmes, the use of ability grouping and the timing of subject choice) while, at the same time, having sufficient student numbers in each school to allow us to explore variation among groups of students in terms of gender, social background and prior achievement. Because of the extent of active school choice among students and their parents in Ireland (see above), students from any given primary school were likely to transfer to a large number of secondary schools with very different approaches to subject choice, ability grouping and student integration. Following students from the primary school could, therefore, result in having only a small number of students from the targeted primary school in any given secondary school. As a result of these potential challenges, it was decided that the study would examine the transition process from the perspective of the secondary school. This approach inevitably resulted in a loss of information on student experiences before the transfer to secondary education (although retrospective information was sought from young people). However, it was felt that this loss would be counterbalanced by the provision of much richer information on between-school variation at secondary level.

Because of the desire to document both the extent of variation in school practices and the experiences of students in particular school settings, it was decided to use a mixed methods design. Mixed methods research has become increasingly prevalent in social and educational research (Tashakorri and Teddlie, 2003). Many of the most influential studies of school effects have employed school case studies, often in conjunction with representative surveys of schools. Some researchers have used a purposive sample of schools designed to capture a wide variety of school characteristics (see e.g. Rutter et al., 1979; Smith and Tomlinson, 1989). Others have selected schools to capture key dimensions hypothesised to influence student experiences and

outcomes. Thus, in the Louisiana School Effectiveness Study, Teddlie and Stringfield (1993) used survey data to select 18 schools in terms of their effectiveness and socio-economic composition for longitudinal study (see also earlier work by Brookover, 1979).

The initial stage of the PPLS involved a postal survey of all (over 700) secondary school principals carried out in early 2002. The questionnaire covered issues relating to principal perceptions of the transition from primary to secondary schooling along with detailed information on the school's support structures for first year students, approach to subject choice, the use of ability grouping and perceptions of the lower secondary curriculum. There was a high response rate (78%) to the survey, thus capturing important sources of variation in school organisation.

The survey data were used to identify case-study schools for a more in-depth analysis of young people's experiences in the early years of secondary education. A review of the relevant literature indicated that three aspects of school practice were likely to be crucial in shaping student experiences of the transition process: the support structures used to help students integrate into the school, the school's approach to subject choice and the approach to ability grouping. The purposive sample was thus designed to capture variation in these three dimensions. Trading off having a larger number of schools to capture greater variation against resource constraints, 12 schools were selected to capture variation in the three dimensions along with a mixture in terms of gender and social mix as well as region. One of these schools discontinued their involvement during the school year while another decided not to be involved in the longitudinal component of the study. In order to capture diversity across different school contexts, two additional schools (Harris Street and Argyle Street) were asked to participate in the second year of the study. These schools were chosen in line with the three dimensions originally used to select the schools for the study of first year students. There were limitations in that we did not have information on the first year experiences of students in these schools, although information on the approaches used to facilitate the transition process was collected from key personnel in these schools. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the case-study schools.

Within each of the case-study schools, in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule were conducted in early 2002 with the key personnel dealing with first year students. The personnel included school principals, deputy principals, guidance counsellors, year heads for first year, first year class tutors and other key personnel, such as counsellors

Table 1.1 Characteristics of the case-study schools

School	*Size*	*Sector*	*Social mix*	*Subject choice (lower secondary)*	*Ability grouping*
Argyle Street	Large	Community/comprehensive	Mixed	Later	Streamed/banded
Barrack Street	Small	Girls' voluntary secondary	Working-class	Early	Mixed ability
Belmore Street	Large	Girls' voluntary secondary	Mixed	Later	Mixed ability
Dawes Point	Small	Boys' voluntary secondary	Working-class	Early	Streamed/banded
Dawson Street	Medium	Community/comprehensive	Mixed	Early	Mixed ability
Dixon Street	Large	Vocational	Working-class	Later	Streamed/banded
Fig Lane	Large	Coeducational voluntary secondary (fee-paying)	Middle-class	Later	Mixed ability
Harris Street	Large	Girls' voluntary secondary	Middle-class	Later	Mixed ability
Hay Street	Small	Vocational	Working-class	Early	Streamed/banded
Lang Street	Small	Vocational	Working-class	Later	Streamed/banded
Park Street	Large	Boys' voluntary secondary	Mixed	Early	Streamed/banded
Wattle Street	Small	Boys' voluntary secondary	Mixed	Early	Mixed ability

Note: Pseudonyms are used to identify the schools

and chaplains. These interviews focused on: policy and practice in relation to student transition into secondary education; support structures for first year students; perceptions of the needs of first year students; organisational issues regarding first year students, including ability grouping and subject choice; and parental involvement within the school. Interviews with a total of 103 key personnel were conducted by two members of the project team in May 2002. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition to the individual interviews, structured interviews were conducted with teachers teaching first years in the 12 case-study schools. A total of 226 teachers were interviewed, making up 93% of all first year teachers in these schools. The interviews focused on their approach to teaching first year students, perceptions of the lower secondary curriculum, receipt of information on incoming students and perceptions of first year students.

The cohort of students to be included in the study started secondary school in September 2002. Because of the focus on initial experiences *and* the impact of first year experiences, self-completion questionnaires were administered to students at the beginning (September) and end (May) of first year. The initial questionnaire focused on student experiences of the transition process, their perceptions of their new school and their views on the curriculum. The measures used drew on a number of different sources: items previously used for surveys of Irish secondary students on, for example, the nature of student–teacher interaction and prevalence of being bullied; items on transition experiences drawn from the English Oracle study (on academic self-image, liking school and teachers); and questions specifically developed for this study. A draft questionnaire was piloted in two schools to ensure that students could understand the questions and that the questionnaire yielded relevant information. For the full study, questionnaires in wave 1 were completed by a total of 916 students, making up 92% of all first year students in the 12 schools. In addition, Drumcondra Level 6 standardised reading and computation tests (designed for sixth class students in primary school) were administered to first year students in September and May to assess baseline achievement levels as well as academic progress over first year. Wave 2 questionnaires were administered in May of first year and asked about student experiences over the course of the year.

In order to more fully explore students' own experiences of the transition process, group interviews were conducted by two members of the project team with first year students in October 2002 in each of the schools. A group of six students from each class was selected at random

by the project team from the list of first year students in the school and students were interviewed within their class groups. A total of 38 group interviews were conducted, including a total of over 200 students. These interviews focused on students' expectations of secondary school, their feelings about making the transition, their views on their new school and aspects of first year they would like to change. These interviews were recorded and transcribed.

In the second and subsequent years, interviews were again conducted with key personnel in the case-study schools (see Table 1.2). These interviews focused on the issues arising for the student cohort at specific stages of the schooling process with the emphasis changing from approaches to facilitating transition towards general personal and social support structures in place for students. Students were surveyed once a year for the remainder of their time in school, with the survey taking place around January/February of each year.[1] The presence of the optional Transition year (TY) programme after the end of lower secondary education (see Chap. 2) meant that students in the cohort entered their Leaving Certificate programme at different time points. As a result, fieldwork for the upper secondary phases of the study took place over a three-year period.

A core set of measures was included in all of the questionnaires, in order to explore changes over time in attitudes to school and to teachers, academic self-image, parental involvement in their education, and activities outside school. However, the questionnaire content was also adjusted to reflect students' stage of schooling—for example, asking about choice of subjects after the transition to upper secondary, asking about plans for the future in the final year of school, and so on. Students were asked to report the grades they received in the Junior Certificate (lower secondary) exam and were asked for permission to access their Leaving Certificate (upper secondary) results.

Table 1.2 Survey responses and interviews conducted for the study

	Key personnel (individual interviews)	*Student survey (% of cohort)*	*Group interviews with students*
2nd year	64	86	47
3rd year	66	86	47
5th year	43	84	62 (+18 with Transition Year)
6th year	48	81	53

Group interviews with students took place around six weeks after the survey time point every year. As in the first year, students were interviewed in groups chosen from base classes. These interviews focused on some common issues across years, particularly perceptions of teaching and learning, but the interview schedules were adjusted to reflect the relevant stage. Thus, third year interviews focused on feelings about, and preparation for, the impending Junior Certificate exam; fifth year interviews addressed choices of subjects and subject levels, and final year interviews explored feelings about the impending high-stakes examinations as well as about plans after leaving school.

The mixed methods approach used in the study provided richer insights than either questionnaire or qualitative interview alone. The questionnaire information captured variation between individual students in their attitudes to school and their subjects and allowed for an exploration of the way in which individual students changed and developed as they moved through school. Questionnaires also had an advantage in providing greater privacy to the student which could facilitate franker responses; a student is likely to be more willing to admit to having been bullied in a self-completion questionnaire than they might in a group setting, for example. However, questionnaires had some disadvantages. Their structured nature meant that students could only respond on issues that the researchers deemed important rather than ones which they themselves regarded as central to their lives. Furthermore, it may be difficult to explore complex issues, such as what aspects of teaching enhance learning, in a very structured way. In contrast, focus group interviews allowed students to raise issues which were of concern to them. For example, in the interviews, how students felt their teachers treated them and perceptions of unfair conduct loomed large in student accounts of school life (see Chaps. 4 and 5) and the perceived importance of such interaction would have been more difficult to capture in a survey setting. The focus group interviews also yielded insights into the patterns revealed in the survey data (Morgan, 1997; Johnson and Turner, 2003), allowing us to explore the factors underlying student perceptions of school and of their teachers.

Like all research studies, the study had some limitations. Birth cohort studies (such as the British Birth Cohort 1970 and the Growing Up in Ireland study), which capture the experiences of children (and their parents) from birth to adult life, have an enormous advantage in capturing the interrelationships among different dimensions of the lives of children

and young people over time (Bynner and Joshi, 2007). In contrast, the approach taken in the PPLS was 'narrow but deep', focusing on young people's experiences in school rather than broader aspects of their wellbeing and social networks. At the same time, birth cohort studies typically survey young people every few years while capturing experiences on an annual basis in the current study provided crucial insights into the way in which young people's attitudes and behaviours are shaped by the school context over time.

A further limitation of the study was that it focused on the experiences of students who had remained within full-time education. A supplementary study on early school leavers involved the identification of young people who had dropped out of school (rather than transferred to another school), an analysis of the prior characteristics of early school leavers compared with those who remained in school, and in-depth life history interviews with 25 of these young people (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). This study facilitated the identification of the factors which were associated with early school leaving, chief among them being the quality of teacher–student relationships (see Chap. 4).

A mixed methods study yields a considerable amount of material, all the more so when that study is longitudinal in nature. Reports were published on each stage of the longitudinal study from first to sixth year (Smyth et al., 2004; 2006; 2007; Smyth and Calvert, 2011; Smyth et al., 2011). However, this book represents the first opportunity to take a thematic perspective on the trajectories experienced by the young people in the study cohort.

The study's contribution is threefold: it confirms previous findings or commonsense views, for example, about the experiences of transitions into secondary education; it presents new findings on stages and turning points in schooling, among other issues; and it allows us to unpack the processes behind what we knew already, especially around how gender and social class shape student experiences (see Chap. 8). Mixed methods longitudinal studies are rare, even in education. Combining survey data and group interviews over a six-year period not only provides information on what happens at each stage of the school career but also helps trace why it occurs. The extent of active school choice in the Irish context allows for an in-depth exploration of the way in which school social mix influences student experiences, over and above individual social class background, an ongoing subject for debate within educational research (see e.g. Palardy, 2013). Furthermore, the high-stakes nature of standardised

examinations in Ireland provides an opportunity to examine the way in which they shape young people's attitudes to, and experiences of, teaching and learning.

Outline of the Book

This book is structured thematically, beginning by looking at the nature of within-school trajectories and then going on to examine educational decision-making, school climate, ability grouping and curriculum, teaching and assessment. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the pathways young people take through secondary education and how the structure of the education system shapes student experiences, examining how their attitudes to school and to teachers are profoundly altered by the school context. A number of previous studies have focused on the difficulties around the transition from primary to secondary education (see e.g. Galton et al., 1999). This chapter indicates that first year of secondary school is indeed characterised by excitement and turbulence as students adjust to the new school setting. However, the analyses indicate that the real difficulties may surface for students later on in the process, with second year emerging as the crucial year for student engagement. Few studies have addressed the transition to upper secondary education. This chapter shows that, even though students do not change school as in other national systems, the transition can be a difficult one, with increasing academic demands placed on students as they move into a stage of schooling dominated by high-stakes examinations.

Chapter 3 looks at educational decision-making among young people. As students move through secondary education, they are required to make a series of decisions—about the subjects they take, about the levels at which they take subjects, about which programmes to study and about what they will do after leaving school. This chapter presents detailed information on the way young people make choices, highlighting the importance of advice and support from their parents, and the consequences of these choices for their later outcomes. Relatively few studies outside the USA have addressed the role of formal guidance in young people's decision-making (for an exception, see Howieson and Semple, 2000, on students in Scotland). This chapter presents a fresh understanding of secondary students' use of, and satisfaction with, school-based guidance provision.

Chapter 4 looks at school climate, that is, the quality of interaction between teachers and students. The study upon which the book draws

collected very detailed information on different types of student misbehaviour over time. The chapter looks at how misbehaviour differs by social class and gender, and how it is shaped by the school context. The chapter provides new insights into how the interaction between students and teachers changes in response to the presence of high-stakes exams. Some students, particularly working-class boys, become caught up in a cycle of being reprimanded and 'acting out' through misbehaviour in response. For many, this cycle is found to culminate in early school leaving or educational failure. The nature of interaction with teachers is found to influence a wide range of student outcomes, not only academic performance but also self-image and stress levels.

Chapter 5 explores young people's status within the school structure, and the extent to which they feel they are treated as 'children' or 'adults'. The chapter presents fresh evidence on the potential mismatch between how young people are treated within and outside school, an issue that has been neglected in previous research. In their final year of school, many of the cohort are 18 years of age and lead relatively adult lives outside school. But a significant number of young people think that their teachers are stricter than their parents and they feel they have much less say over aspects of their school life than over their lives outside school. The discussion highlights how the patterns of misbehaviour discussed in Chap. 4 can, to some extent, be seen as a response to the lack of autonomy afforded to young people within the school setting.

Chapter 6 examines the impact of ability grouping on student experiences and outcomes. Unlike in countries such as Germany, there is no distinct tracking between academic and vocational programmes in Irish secondary schools. However, some schools use streaming, allocating students to their base classes according to prior ability. The chapter looks at the rationale given by school personnel for using streaming and the way in which use of the practice varies across different types of schools. The chapter presents fresh evidence not only on the outcomes of rigid ability grouping but also on the processes accounting for these outcomes. In particular, the discussion traces the way in which young people rapidly absorb their labelling as academically 'weak' and the classroom climate that results from this labelling. Even in schools that have ostensibly mixed ability base classes, ability grouping (setting) can be used for specific subjects. Furthermore, the opportunity for students to take more demanding, higher level subjects is found to vary across schools, reflecting school social mix as well as the interplay between school policy and teacher expectations.

Chapter 7 explores young people's perspectives on teaching and learning. Overall, students are found to favour more active teaching approaches that encourage them to give their own opinion. This view of 'good teaching' contrasts with the highly teacher-led approach they experience, particularly in exam years. The chapter traces the impact of high-stakes exams at the end of lower and upper secondary stages on the nature of teaching and learning in the classroom. The presence of the exam is found to result in high levels of stress for students, as they try to combine homework and study in preparation for the exam. The chapter shows too that private tuition (shadow education) is an important feature of the Irish educational landscape as students seek to improve their grades in high-stakes exams.

The final chapter, Chap. 8, reflects upon the evidence presented in the book, highlighting the implications for policy at the national and school levels. The discussion traces the way in which the current educational system shapes student experience and discusses the kinds of reforms needed to provide students with an authentic and engaging experience of school. The chapter highlights the fact that, even in the absence of radical reform, schools can adopt a number of measures which will foster student learning and engagement.

Note

1. Supplementary studies were conducted with those who dropped out of school early and with the parents of the cohort at upper secondary stage. Details on the precise methodologies used in these studies can be found in Banks, Smyth (2010) and Banks, Smyth (2011). In addition, a study was conducted of the post-school experiences of this cohort of young people (see McCoy et al., 2014).

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CHAPTER 2

Structuring Student Experience

Chapter 1 has outlined some of the main features of the Irish educational system. This chapter begins by providing more detail on the different phases of secondary education in Ireland as a basis for exploring how these phases structure student experience.

Young people in Ireland make the transition from primary to secondary school at around 11 or 12 years of age. As in other national systems, this transition involves exposure to new subjects, more teachers compared to a single classroom teacher and a new peer group. While typically this transition involves moving to a bigger school, the scale of the difference is greater in the Irish context since over four in ten primary schools have fewer than 100 students compared to only 2% of secondary schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2015a). Furthermore, changing school often means moving from a coeducational to a single-sex school, since over a third of secondary schools in Ireland are single-sex compared to only 14% of primary schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2015a). Lower secondary education (junior cycle, in national terminology) comprises a three-year phase, culminating in a nationally standardised exam, the Junior Certificate.[1] Students are required to study Maths, English and Irish (in the latter case, unless they received their primary education outside the State or have a learning disability); they all also take Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Physical Education, and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE). The remaining subjects studied reflect the

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interaction of school provision and student choice, though almost all students take Science, History, Geography and Religious Education and the majority take Business Studies and French. At lower secondary level, young people can study Irish, English and Maths at higher, ordinary or foundation level while the other exam subjects can be taken at higher or ordinary level; only CSPE is studied at common level. Students typically take 11 or 12 subjects in the Junior Certificate exam. Historically, this had been a 'high-stakes' exam since grades achieved facilitated access to (better quality) employment and to training opportunities such as apprenticeships (Breen et al., 1995). However, over time the proportion of young people leaving school directly after the Junior Certificate exam has declined markedly so its role as a labour market signal is now less evident. Nevertheless, as will be seen later in this book, junior cycle experiences play an important role in setting the tone for young people's later engagement with education and their academic outcomes. Furthermore, having taken particular subjects and subject levels channels young people into related pathways at upper secondary level and beyond, highlighting the continuing importance of the Junior Certificate exam.

After the Junior Certificate exam, students may take a 'Transition Year' before embarking on the two-year upper secondary programme (senior cycle, in national terminology). The TY programme was developed to provide an opportunity for wider educational, personal and social development in an otherwise exam-focused system, and is unique from an international perspective. TY is provided in four-fifths of schools but is less likely to be offered in schools serving more socio-economically disadvantaged populations, reflecting concerns on the part of school personnel about the potential effect of an extra year in school on student retention (Clerkin, 2013; Smyth, Hannan and Byrne, 2004). Schools may decide to offer TY on an optional or, more rarely, on a compulsory basis, with just over half of the total student cohort taking the programme (Clerkin, 2013). Schools have considerable discretion over which subjects and activities to offer as part of the programme, with most combining traditional school subjects, tasters of tertiary-type courses (such as archaeology), personal and social development, work experience and cultural activities (Smyth, Hannan and Byrne, 2004).

The two-year upper secondary programme culminates in the Leaving Certificate exam. A small proportion, around 5–6% of the cohort, takes the alternative Leaving Certificate Applied programme, which adopts a

more hands-on approach to learning and assesses students on the basis of coursework as well as exams. Students typically take seven exam subjects for the Leaving Certificate; Irish and Maths can be taken at higher, ordinary or foundation level, and the remaining subjects at higher or ordinary level. As at lower secondary level, young people are required to study Irish, English and Maths. The Leaving Certificate can be characterised as a very high-stakes exam. The grades achieved influence access to HE and to high-quality employment (Smyth, McCoy, 2009). As grades are a more important determinant of HE entry in Ireland than the kinds of subjects studied (see Iannelli et al., 2015), there is a 'points race' in terms of access to HE, especially in relation to more prestigious fields of study like medicine. The backwash effect of this focus on Leaving Certificate grades is discussed later in the book. The remainder of this chapter looks at the way the structure of the schooling system shapes young people's experiences of education.

Making the Transition

The study findings indicate that Irish young people making the transition to secondary education share many of the concerns and anxieties of their counterparts in other countries (see e.g. Delamont and Galton, 1987; Mellor and Delamont, 2011). Young people express a mixture of excitement and anxiety. On the one hand, they embrace access to new subjects, with many describing the educational experience as involving 'better classes … better subjects' (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years), with increased opportunity to try more hands-on subjects for some students:

> I kind of prefer it, because in primary school all you done was Maths, English, Irish, Religion, a bit boring, you kind of get Technology of making stuff and Home Ec[onomics], just stuff like that. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 1st years)

On the other hand, almost half of the student cohort report missing their primary school friends 'a lot' while one in six misses their primary teacher a lot. In addition, they experience a significant change in their social positioning, from being the oldest in primary school to the youngest in secondary school, with this status shift evident in feelings of being lost in navigating a new social and spatial world.

> You were the biggest in primary school and now you are the smallest. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

> There are too many teachers.
> Too many classes.
> And we got all confused and all. The first day I hadn't got a clue where I was going.
> We were all getting lost.
> And then we would get given out to when [we got lost].
> …
> And if you forget where your class is and you are late, they give out hell to you saying "where were you?". And if you say "I forgot where the class was", they go "well you are in the school long enough".
> We were only in the school two days and she [the teacher] goes "you are in the school long enough to know where you are going". (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 1st years)

The status shift was also linked to a sense of vulnerability, with boys in particular talking about the 'first year beating' as a rite of passage.

> Most of them are only after you for the laugh because you're a first year. You see that's all part and parcel of it coming into secondary school, you're going to get your first year beating like. So there's no point in going mad telling the teachers because you know they're only doing what's going on.
> People said it's a tradition.
> It is a kind of a tradition in one sense.
> And people say you can get the next years next year.
> Interviewer: And would you?
> I'm not going near them because people did go near me and I know how it feels then, most people would want to cop on to know what's going to happen. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

> There's this thing they play up in the corridors, pin ball, when you're walking through all the fellas around the sides, if one fella catches you he throws you to the side and they keep pushing you back and forth. (Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 1st years)

While in some instances, this appeared to reflect scaremongering, a number of students recounted instances where they were 'picked on' and physically hurt because they were younger.

Banging your head and…
Kicking you and stuff.
I got thrown into thorn bushes.
…
I got the thorns in me.
Yes, I got the thorns in my leg and it bled when they took them out.
I couldn't sit down for ages. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 1st years)

While being one of the smallest in the school was a source of anxiety, at the same time, many students felt ready for this growing independence. They contrasted the approach in secondary school with that in primary school where they were treated as 'babies':

Because [in primary] they treat us like kids.
Yes, like babies.
And we are not kids any more. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 1st years)

Young people also discussed the constraints placed on them in primary school, especially around the kinds of food they could eat and the physical activity they could engage in.

It's better, it's up to you to get to your class and it's up to you, like in primary school they tell you to eat your lunch but now it's up to you to do your own thing. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 1st years)

In primary school you didn't have as much freedom. You weren't allowed to eat crisps and only drink water.
…
They make crap rules in primary. You can't run or anything.
In fifth class there were all these rules coming in, and they had yellow lines everywhere. And we weren't allowed to play games because our principal thought we might hit someone.
We had a big yard and we used to be all playing in it but then they put it into sections, about 10 years ago we used to be allowed to play football but they stopped that.
We weren't allowed any sweets or fizzy drinks. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

These comments are not to imply greater freedom across the board at secondary level since many students reported that their teachers were

stricter than had been the case in primary school; the nature of interaction between teachers and students is explored in greater detail in Chaps. 4 and 5.

> I found in primary that I used to get away with stuff more easily than you would here. Not doing your homework—there were people in our class who never bothered and the teacher never bothered to give out to them.
> But now you get in big trouble for not doing your homework. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 1st years)

Making the transition involved a new social and organisational milieu but fundamental to the shift was a change in the nature of schoolwork. Many students reported a more accelerated pace of instruction, with secondary teachers taking less time to explain the material in class:

> In every class they always do a chapter of a book and then go onto a different chapter even if you don't understand it. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 1st years)

> I find maths harder here.
> They are not explained as well as they were in primary school.
> …
> We have only forty minutes to do maths here so they take it quicker with you. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 1st years)

As well as adjusting to a faster pace of instruction, many young people reported a discontinuity between primary and secondary levels in the approach taken to teaching certain subjects:

> Sometimes there are different ways to do your Maths than the way you did in primary school.
> Different methods like.
> Yes, different methods and you have got to do it the way the teacher does it. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 1st years)

In keeping with greater academic demands, students reported a greater volume of homework—'a lot more than primary school' (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 1st years):

> That is the biggest thing, the homework. In primary it takes about five minutes and it's all done, now here it's hours. And you have to study as well. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

> You get homework at the weekends here and we didn't get homework at the weekends in primary school. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 1st years)

Despite the challenges in adjusting to a new context, most young people settle into secondary school relatively quickly, with only one in six reporting difficulties that last beyond the first month. Three sets of factors emerge as most important in facilitating the transition process. There are clear gender differences in the prevalence of transition difficulties, with girls 1.8 times more likely to take a long time to settle in than boys, even taking account of other factors. These gender differences seem to relate to the greater emphasis girls place on their social relationships, being more likely than boys to miss their primary school friends and their previous teacher. Preparation for the transition is found to play a key role, with those who consider that they 'had a good idea what to expect coming to this school' being much less likely to experience difficulties. It is worth noting that young people drew on a range of information about what the new school would be like, including siblings, friends, neighbours and visits to the new school, so knowing what to expect did not always involve a formal transition programme. Interestingly, the presence of familiar friends in the new school did not in itself make a difference. Social networks helped to ease the transition with students who liked their secondary teachers, finding them friendly and helpful, more likely to settle in quickly. In contrast, experiencing bullying at the beginning of first year was strongly associated with difficulties in settling into the new setting.

Moving on (or Not)

Research on school pathways has largely focused on the importance of key transition points in shaping student experience. Moving from primary to secondary education is one such transition. The study findings indicate that this is a time of turbulence for young people as they adjust to new academic and social demands (see above). As students make the further transition into second year, they describe feeling more 'settled', being familiar with their peers, teachers and subjects:

> You've got older, you've matured more and you've got used to the teachers and you've got to know what everybody's like. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> You feel more settled as well.
> …
> You get closer [to peers].
> Yeah, you get to know more people, know more about them. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> The material and the subjects are so new to you in first year that like in second year you're used to it, so it becomes easier. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 2nd years)

However, as this section illustrates, the move into second year can involve additional challenges and can reveal important dimensions of differentiation in school engagement which were obscured in first year. A number of studies have pointed to the impact of the transition into secondary school on student outcomes, including attainment and attitudes to school (Galton et al., 1999). However, the current study findings point to the need to distinguish between different aspects of the transition experience. Thus, girls are more likely to miss their primary teachers and friends and therefore find the transition difficult. However, they are more academically engaged (on average) than boys and thus likely to have fewer medium- and long-term difficulties in terms of achievement and retention. Similarly, middle-class students also face challenges integrating into the new school setting but are more likely than their working-class peers to have the family resources to help them navigate important choices around subject and subject levels (see Chap. 3), which will in turn channel them into valued and valuable pathways at upper secondary and HE levels. These sources of differentiation, in terms of gender, social class and prior achievement, become more apparent in second year and are found to have long-lasting effects on subsequent experiences and outcomes.

Because of its position midway through a three-year cycle culminating in a terminal exam, second year was seen by school personnel as an 'in-between' year, where the absence of an exam focus allowed the turmoil of adolescence to play out in the school context. Thus, many staff described students as 'acting up' and becoming more self-confident than the quiet first years.

> To me they seem the biggest handful…when they get to second year they realise that they kind of have the run of the place because they're no longer the children. Yeah, a lot of changes, a lot of changes in personality,

> people who studied a lot in first year and kind of relaxing then in second year, people who would have been very good, never back answered or give cheek or anything like that, suddenly out of character, snap back or something like that. (Teacher, Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed)

Students themselves reported a change in the nature of interaction with their teachers, with positive interaction (praise or positive feedback) becoming less prevalent and negative interaction (being reprimanded) increasingly so (see Chap. 4). This shift was seen, in part, as reflecting the greater leeway allowed to first year students as they coped with the transition. In contrast, second year students were expected to be familiar with school routines and to 'knuckle down' to their work:

> When we were in first year you got away with everything,
> I think the reason why we got away with everything in first year is because like we were only like new to the school.
> So now we like, we're used to the school so they're going a bit stricter. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 2nd years)

> The teachers were all nice to us in first year because we were the babies and now they're mean. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

> Some of them just have this thing in their head like first years treat them nice, second years don't. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 2nd years)

For some students, especially working-class boys, a pattern of 'acting up' and being in turn reprimanded ('given out to', in colloquial terms) emerged, one which set the tone for the years to come (see Chap. 4). Thus, many young people reported a different response on the part of teachers to minor rule infringements, with swifter escalation to formal punishment:

> There's no messing[2] this year
> You were allowed mess in first year. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 2nd years)

> You get more attention.
> And you get more detention. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> In first year if you did something wrong like, it was just like ah well like, they didn't give you a detention or a mark but now like if you do anything bad like everyone gets detention or like a report or something.
> We used to get away with it but not anymore. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

At the same time as this shift in teacher–student relations, increasing academic demands were placed on students 'to cover the course' for the exam at the end of third year. Young people reported an increase in the amount of homework given and a faster pace and greater complexity of class material.

> There's more work involved and … in the first year exams you just give straight out answers and then in the second year then you've to give like longer ones. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> The teachers go faster as well.
> Yeah, they go so much faster like.
> And it's really like if you don't do your homework it's really serious, like you have to always do your homework and you get a lot of it as well.
> Every day. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

Even though second year students were interviewed more than 16 months before the Junior Certificate exam, they reported that the need to prepare for the exam was constantly emphasised by teachers:

> The work and all the subjects and the teachers are always talking about the Junior Cert
> …
> They are constantly on about the Junior Cert and putting pressure on you. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> They're saying that we'd have to study this chapter because it's important for the Junior Cert and it will probably come up in the Junior Cert. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> They [teachers] mention it every single class.
> You have to do this for the Junior Cert and you have to do that and all and this won't be good enough for Junior Cert. (Wattle Street, boys, socially mixed, 2nd years)

They keep telling us to work hard and learn this for the Junior Cert. and learn this for the Junior Cert and all.
It's all pressure. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

The presence of the exam was seen as structuring the phases of lower secondary education:

First year is only a mess year, second year there's a bit of studying and third year you have to study a lot. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 2nd years)

Such emphasis on the Junior Certificate exam was seen as premature by some students, who adopted a very different time horizon to their teachers:

About from January they should start putting pressure on you, not the year before. That'd wreck your head. (Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

Next year we have to actually pay attention as well.
That's next year.
Yeah, that's next year, we can worry about it then.
It's a long way away. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

Among students, clear differences emerged in their responses to these academic challenges. Although most students reported increasing academic demands, there was some evidence of drift, with some groups of young people finding the schoolwork 'about the same' or even easier:

There isn't anything really different.
The same as first year really. (Hay Street, coeducational, working-class, 2nd years)

The school work is easier for some reason.
It's because the teachers were just trying to push us to see what they could get out of you in first year and this year they know what you're up to.
They know what you're like.
They know what your level of achievement is. (Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

Others appeared to be disengaging from school, making less investment in homework and study than they had previously:

> I think that like most people, like last year everyone was kind of concerned because it was first year and to do well and stuff, no-one really cares this year. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

> Interviewer: So how much homework would you get this year?
> Very, very little.
> Yeah.
> Doesn't matter, I don't do it.
> Interviewer: How much time would you spend on it?
> Ten minutes.
> Not even ten minutes.
> I'll be honest with you I don't do it at all.
> Interviewer: Why?
> Couldn't be bothered.
> We don't get much, we only get one thing so we don't bother doing it. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 2nd years)

This polarisation in engagement reflected gender and social class fault lines, with middle-class girls among the increasingly engaged group and working-class boys more likely to drift or disengage. This pattern had longer term consequences as young people found it difficult to re-engage after this drift—in part, because they had lost ground in terms of course coverage but also because they had earned a reputation in the minds of teachers and such behavioural patterns became firmly embedded in the day-to-day climate of the class (see also Chap. 4).

The 'First State Exam'

Third year culminates in the first national standardised examination that young people have encountered. Their accounts vividly illustrate the way in which the presence of the exam dominates the nature of teaching and learning, an issue discussed in greater detail in Chap. 7. On moving from second to third year, young people report that schoolwork has become more demanding and that they spend much more time on homework and study than previously. Students felt there was a discontinuity in expectations and workload between second and third year, with a rapid escalation in the demands placed on them in the face of the upcoming exam.

> Like in first and second year you got no homework and in third year you're just getting a whole pile of it.
> You know what? We came into third year just thinking it was like first and second year. We hadn't got a clue. Because we got it so easy in first and second year, we just hadn't got a clue what this year was going to be like, and we still haven't like adapted to it. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 3rd years)

> I think the people in first and second year should be made more aware of it. (Interruption: They should be made more aware.) Because like we were … We were only told this year, like, we were only, all the pressure was only put on us this year about what we need to do and all.
> Like they should start from first year on, the pressure, not just from third year, like they're just having, they used to have a doss in first and second year but then when they come in to third year they're going to have to, they're going to get a fright from the pressure, all the pressure the teachers are putting, every class you go in to all you hear is Mocks,[3] Mocks, Mocks; when they're over, Junior Cert, Junior Cert, Junior Cert. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 3rd years)

This increase in demands was reported across most groups of young people but was emphasised more strongly by the groups of female students, regardless of their social class background.

In third year, young people distinguished between 'homework', work allocated by their teachers, and 'study', time spent revising material in preparation for the Junior Certificate exam. While in practice teacher assignment of homework was designed to facilitate learning and preparation for the exam, it was not interpreted in this way by the students themselves. Young people framed the allocation as a zero-sum trade-off, bemoaning the way in which the time spent on homework squeezed out the time available for studying:

> Most of the time I don't have time for study because I've so much homework. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 3rd years)

> It keeps getting harder as we go on. At the start of the year you were studying more and doing homework less, but now you're doing so much homework you've got so little time to study, so by the time you go home and everything…
> You're too tired. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 3rd years)

Homework and study demands were also seen as constraining leisure time after school and at weekends:

> Some days I go home and I won't be able to go out with the amount of homework. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 3rd years)

There was a sharp contrast between these viewpoints and those of students in Dixon Street school, which served a more working-class population, who emphasised the lack of homework in third year (see Chaps. 6 and 7). Here students in the higher stream reported spending time on homework and study which contrasted with those in the middle and lower stream classes who appeared to be drifting or even disengaging from their schoolwork:

> I can't actually remember the last time I did homework.
> …
> We don't actually get homework.
> …
> We do get it but they don't like do it.
> No they don't really.
> Most of them don't bother, it's just if you don't do it they don't care.
> They know we don't do it so they don't bother checking it.
> They know that nobody is going to do it.
> …
> In first and second year we used to do homework all the time, it's just this year, you don't get homework really.
> They'll tell you to.
> More or less they say you have to study. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 3rd years, middle stream)

> Nobody gets any homework.
> …
> Because the teachers think that we don't know how to do it at home. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 3rd years, lower stream)

The latter view was also echoed in the lower stream class in Park Street boys' school, which had a socially mixed intake:

> We don't get no homework.
> …
> We are special (laugh).
> …

> Do you know why? We don't do it, because they know we just couldn't be interested. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 3rd years, lower stream)

In third year, teachers are seen as increasingly focussed on 'covering the course' in preparation for the Junior Certificate exam:

> There's pressure to get the course finished, that they're behind on. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 3rd years)

This focus was described as resulting in less tolerance of misbehaviour on the part of teachers, in turn fuelling more negative teacher–student interactions.

> Teachers are real like, really, really laid back in like first and second year, like if you were given homework, well my classes, they wouldn't really care in first or second year if you didn't have it in, they're just like oh yeah have it done for such and such a day but this year it's like oh yeah you're just like behind and all this.
> Just get yourself marked.
> Yeah, you're going to be marked down.
> You get punished, but even if you've piles of homework to do and you can't get around to doing that you get punished for it. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 3rd years)

Pressure and stress emerged as important themes in student accounts of third year, with girls in particular worried about how they would fare in the exam. The use of practice exams ('mocks') around February of the exam year further fuelled these feelings of pressure.

> I know, you see I'm a really laid back person and I've never felt stressed in my life except for the day before our mock exam, I never felt like that, it was like there was a pressure inside of me and I was hey I know what it feels like. Oh my god I was so nervous. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 3rd years)

> Huge pressure, they should spread it out over the year, have one test.
> That's what they're doing about the Leaving Cert, aren't they.
> There's too much pressure like, you have to remember everything.
> There's too many subjects to go study sure like.
> And then you have to try and remember everything like over a couple of days and it's impossible. (Wattle Street, boys, socially mixed, 3rd years)

However, some students felt that the mock exams lessened the pressure on them because it increased their familiarity with the exam format, taking some of the fear out of the situation:

> I'm more relaxed about it since after the pres.
> I'm very relaxed about it.
> Because I kind of know what it's going to be like. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 3rd years)

> You know what to expect now because of the mocks. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 3rd years)

A number of students took private tuition ('grinds' in Irish parlance) to help them prepare for the Junior Certificate exam (see Chap. 7).

> Because it sort of makes you feel more happy.
> You feel so much safer after getting grinds because you're like wow I made an effort.
> My parents are making me.
> And I'm bad at languages so.
> Interviewer: If it was down to you, would you do it?
> Yeah.
> Well my friends are all going away because they're in fourth year in a different school, to a trip and I won't have anything to do anyway so I'll probably, I don't know, I might have.
> Yeah you might as well get grinds, everyone else is getting grinds, so.
> I'm like ok. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 3rd years)

Young people had mixed views on the importance of the Junior Certificate exam. On the one hand, it was seen as much less important than the Leaving Certificate.

> The Leaving Cert, it kind of shows you what you're going to do after school and then Junior Cert like doesn't do anything, it's like a practice for the Leaving Cert. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 3rd years)

The exception was for those leaving school, where their lower secondary exam grades were likely to influence their access to employment:

> People who are leaving school.
> Yeah, it's important then for that like. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 3rd years)

> You need your Junior Cert if you're going to get a job after 16. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 3rd years)

> If you're going to leave school after third year it's [the Junior Cert is] going to be really important, but not really if you're going on to do your Leaving Cert. (Wattle Street, boys, socially mixed, 3rd years)

On the other hand, Junior Certificate exam performance was seen as shaping possible pathways within upper secondary education.

> Like it decides your levels you take on for your Leaving Cert so, and it helps you like know what kind of subjects are coming on and all that. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 3rd years)

> I think it's good because it gives you an idea of what you are good at and what subjects you choose for your Leaving Cert. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 3rd years)

Exam performance was also seen as an important reflection on themselves, with their identity as a learner visible to others:

> Because you want to be able to say I did well because if you didn't do well, it's kind of embarrassing when everyone is screaming on the day, ah I got an A, oh I did this and you're just there. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 3rd years)

The idea of the Junior Certificate as a 'practice' for the Leaving Certificate also emerged from student accounts, and has been a central feature of the policy debate in favour of the retention of an external exam at the end of lower secondary education (see Chap. 8):

> It helps you study for your Leaving because you have kind of done an exam already. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 3rd years)

> The Junior Cert is the mocks for your Leaving, gets you prepared for it and all because we're only young now and we'll be older when you're doing it and you know what it's like. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 3rd years)

> Because like you're starting off, you do the first three years then you're sitting a State exam, your first State Exam, and then that's being practice for your second one for like the real one that matters. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 3rd years)

Transition Year

The introductory section of this chapter highlighted the framing of the TY programme as a 'break' from exam-focused teaching and learning at lower and upper secondary levels. Among the twelve schools in this study, only seven provided TY. In keeping with findings from a national survey (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004), schools serving working-class populations were less likely to provide the programme, with only three out of five doing so, reflecting concerns about the potential impact of participation on school engagement and retention. Among the seven schools providing TY, three did so on a compulsory or quasi-compulsory[4] basis while four allowed students to choose whether to do the programme or not. Among the cohort of students entering upper secondary education in the case-study schools, 40 % took part in TY. In keeping with previous research (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004), students who opted for the programme were a positively selected group; they had achieved higher grades at Junior Certificate level, had higher educational aspirations and had lower levels of misbehaviour while in third year. In addition, students who were older than average were less likely to take part in the programme which involved an additional year at school.

Young people who took the programme were generally positive about it, with only one in six expressing dissatisfaction, emphasising their encounter with a wider range of subjects and activities.

> You get to choose what you want to do.
> And you get to do more things that you wouldn't do usually. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, TY)

> We've done so many different things that we wouldn't have done if we'd gone straight into fifth year. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, TY)

The chance to sample different subjects as part of the programme was seen as advantageous in allowing for more informed choice of subjects for the Leaving Certificate:

> 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, coeducational, middle-class, TY)

> 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, girls, middle-class, TY)

Work experience was seen as valuable in shaping decisions about which pathways to pursue at upper secondary level and beyond:

> 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. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, TY)

> 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, girls, socially mixed, TY)

Growth in confidence and maturity were also seen as 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, girls, middle-class, TY)

However, the fluid nature of the programme was itself a source of contention for some students, with the year being seen as a 'waste' or 'boring' rather than representing 'real' work. Concern about the transi-

tion into the Leaving Certificate programme was reported by a number of students, who felt they had lost the impetus to study:

> It'll be hard to get into the swing of things next year. (Wattle Street, boys, socially mixed, TY)

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

Interestingly, such criticism was more evident among students interviewed after the transition to upper secondary level rather than during the course of the programme. At this juncture, almost a quarter reported that, in hindsight, they would not have taken TY.

> 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, coeducational, middle-class, 5th years)

> There could have been loads more, but there couldn't have been a lot less. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 5th years)

In the group interviews, students contrasted the freedom of TY with the academic demands of fifth year and highlighted difficulties readjusting to studying.

> It's just a waste of a year.
> It gets you out of the habit of studying. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 5th years)

Whether a difficult transition was related to having taken part in TY will be discussed in the following section.

Transitions to Upper Secondary Level

Much of the literature on school transitions has focused on movement from one type of school to another (e.g. from primary to lower secondary) but has more rarely considered transitions between levels within the same school. Young people in this study reported a sizeable 'step up' between lower and secondary levels in the work expected of them.

> The standard goes up and you're expected just to be able to go from Junior Cert standard to Leaving Cert. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 5th years)

> It's a big jump in between [in Maths]. It's like they made the Junior Cert easier and they didn't change the Leaving Cert so there's even a bigger gap, a really big gap. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 5th years)

Three-quarters found schoolwork 'harder' than in third (Junior Certificate) year while almost half spent more time on homework and study in response to these demands.

> The homework we get is much more harder and there's more in it than third year or before. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 5th years)

> 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, coeducational, socially mixed, 5th years)

This increase in academic demands was particularly evident for those taking higher level subjects.

> 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, girls, working-class, 5th years)

Class material was seen as more demanding and students were increasingly expected to provide long essay-type answers rather than the shorter answers required for the Junior Certificate.

> 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, girls, middle-class, 5th years)

A further source of difficulty related to a mismatch between what young people expected subjects to be like and their actual experience (the issue of decision-making will be discussed further in Chap. 3).

> 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, coeducational school, socially mixed, 5th years)

Thus, subjects like Biology and Physics which had been taken as part of a general science subject at lower secondary level was found to be very detailed, requiring an engagement with complex terminology.

> If I had a choice now I'd go back and I wouldn't do Chemistry or Physics because if they could have told us that you needed like expertise in Maths to do it, you know what I mean.
> …
> It's ridiculous. I mean if you don't have a calculator for one day you are stuck there and you can look at the board all you want to but you will not figure it out. (Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 5th years)

In some subjects, previously viewed as 'practical', such as Home Economics, students found themselves unexpectedly faced with a good deal of more theoretical material:

> Home Ec[onomics], 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, coeducational, socially mixed, 5th years)

> It's a completely, they use different words, completely different language like for Home Ec[onomics], 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, coeducational, socially mixed, 5th years)

English too, a study found easy by most of the cohort at junior cycle level, required the study of increasingly demanding literature.

> 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, boys, working-class, 5th years)

> And [Pride and Prejudice is] an old fashioned book where they talk real posh and all and you don't understand none of the words
> Lots of hard words in it as well. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 5th years)

A significant minority of young people—a third—found the pace of instruction in class too fast and not conducive to developing real understanding of the course material being studied:

> 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, coeducational, socially mixed, 5th years)

The extent to which a focus on 'covering the course' quickly reflects the nature of assessment at the end of senior cycle will be discussed further in Chap. 7.

The difficulty of the transition to upper secondary level caused students to re-evaluate their perspectives on the Junior Certificate exam. While see-

ing it as relatively high stakes during third year, they now saw it as minor, a perspective that was reinforced by their teachers.

> 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, girls, middle-class, 5th years)

> My sister is doing her Junior Cert now like and I would tell her … it is actually a joke compared to what we have to do. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 5th years)

> There was a great big build up to the Junior Cert saying it's very important to have this like, forget about that now, it's the Leaving Cert now. (Hay Street, coeducational, working-class, 5th years)

There was no evidence that the transition was more difficult for those who had experienced the 'freedom' of TY. These students reported difficulties in adjustment but their transition paralleled the experiences of those who moved directly from Junior Certificate to the first year of the Leaving Certificate programme.

Young people's accounts emphasised the academic aspects of the transition much more than the social dimensions. Base class membership became less important as an organising feature as students moved between classes for their optional subjects and often between levels for English, Irish and Maths.

> You used to be in like a class and you used to have all the same classes with the same people but now you're split up for every single class and you're with different people all the time. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 5th years)

Some classes were reshuffled over the transition but 'staying with friends' appeared less important to young people who were now familiar with the rest of their year group.

> I think it has changed, I think I get on with more people this year than I did last year because we were put into mixed classes this year as well so more people talk to each other. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 5th years)

TY had already sundered some friendship groups in schools where it was optional but was itself seen as a foundation for building stronger bonds with other students, bonds which persisted into upper secondary level:

> [During TY] We kind of got to know more classes.
> Yeah, more activities, you're with different people.
> In different situations.
> Not just your class.
> Which we never did before that.
> We kind of just stayed, every class stayed to themselves and you feel like we're so much more bonded. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 5th years)

> Everybody knows each other, well the TYs do anyway because like we were so close last year so we all mix a bit better as well. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 5th years)

The 'Big Exam'

As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, the Leaving Certificate exam is a very high-stakes one in the Irish context, with daily media coverage of what 'comes up' in the exam and a 'good exam' constructed as one which is predictable (see Baird et al.'s, 2014 analysis of media coverage). Not surprisingly then, the spectre of the exam loomed large in students' experiences of sixth year. Teaching and learning was focused on 'covering the course' in preparation for the exam and practising previous exam papers (see Chap. 7). The previous section described an escalation in academic demands as young people moved from lower to upper secondary level. The move into Leaving Certificate year involved a further intensification of workload, with two-thirds of students feeling that schoolwork and homework were even 'harder' and took up 'more of their time' in sixth year compared with fifth year.

> Well there's less homework but it's kind of more studying this year, it's harder because there's kind of more pressure on because of the Leaving Cert actually coming this year, do you know what I mean, rather than last year.
> … It's a lot harder this year, I think. More work like.
> Interviewer: In what way?
> You have to try and balance study with homework.
> Interviewer: Do you get more homework this year?

> About the same as last year. Yeah, [but] then you do study on top of that. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

The actual amount of time spent on homework and study was substantial, with over 40% of girls spending four or more hours a night on homework compared with just under 30% of males. Seven out of ten students found it 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to combine homework and study.

Many young people were critical of the over-reliance on a terminal exam and the 'all or nothing' nature of assessment:

> One week and that's everything that could end up changing your life. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

> Too many subjects, too much in the subjects to cover. Stress follows this and the LC [Leaving Certificate] is made to feel like the end of the world. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

> The Leaving Cert exams are more a test of memory than intelligence. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

At the same time, while critical of the nature of assessment, many students, especially middle-class young people who desired to go on to more selective HE courses, increasingly adopted an instrumental view of teaching and learning, one which valued 'teaching to the test' compared with the more active methodologies they had favoured earlier in their school careers. The implications of the assessment system for young people's construction of themselves as learners are discussed in greater detail in Chap. 7.

Just under half of the study cohort was taking private tuition ('grinds') outside school in preparation for the exams, largely fuelled by the focus of such sessions on exam preparation (see Chap. 7). Among those not taking grinds at the time of the survey, 16% said they would 'definitely' and 32% would 'probably' take private tuition before the Leaving Certificate exam. There was a clear social class gradient in grinds take-up, which is much more prevalent among the higher and lower professional groups and farmer groups. Gender differences were also evident, with higher grinds take-up among females than males (54% compared with 40%).

Stress and pressure became even more dominant themes in student accounts than they had in Junior Certificate year (for a further discussion, see Banks and Smyth, 2015, and Chap. 7 of this book). Two-thirds of

female students reported losing sleep over worry, even as early as February of the exam year. Similarly, over half of female students reported that they felt constantly under strain 'more' or 'much more than usual'. Such strain was largely driven by young people's own desire to do well in the exams, rather than explicit pressure from their teachers or parents. However, this should be seen in the context of the high-stakes nature of the exam, with students recognising the importance of exam grades for their access to valued post-school pathways:

> I'm dreading it [exams].
> Change every day, sometimes I'd be so panicked, I really want my first choice and other days I'm like ah sure it doesn't matter.
> Yeah, because I really want my first choice and it's high points.
> Yeah, we've the same first choice so. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

Teachers' focus within the classroom on covering the course for the exam and practising exam papers was described as fuelling anxiety among students. At the same time, students felt that their teachers understood the pressure they were under:

> They are grand this year they treat us older as well like. You know they don't give out to us as much you know. If we don't have the work done they respect that we don't have the work done like. If we have a reason like, you know.
> … Yeah, they are much more understanding this year. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

At this stage in their school career, teachers placed more responsibility for studying on the young people themselves rather than monitoring homework to the same extent as previously:

> They're not pushing you to study as such for like the Leaving Cert because they're kind of saying you should be doing it under your own steam at this stage because next year like in college you won't have anyone to push you. (Fig Lane, coeducational school, middle-class, 6th years)

> They treat you as more of an adult, they talk to you on the same level…
> … Rather than talking down to you.

> … It was more like [last year] get that homework done and, now it's just like 'girls you should get that homework done but at the end of the day, it's your journey, you know, your life'. It's like college, you know, it's good. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

In tandem with exam preparation, young people are required to complete their HE application form by the end of January of the exam year, adding to the pressures faced by exam students. Chapter 3 describes in greater detail the influences on student decision-making on post-school pathways as well as the nature of provision of guidance and advice within the school context.

Transitions and Turning Points

The discussion so far has described the nature of student experiences on a year-by-year basis. This section traces student perceptions over time to analyse the trajectories they take.

In each school year, from second year onwards, young people were asked to indicate whether they found schoolwork 'harder', 'about the same', or 'easier' than they had in the previous school year.[5] Figure 2.1 depicts a picture of increasing academic challenge as young people move

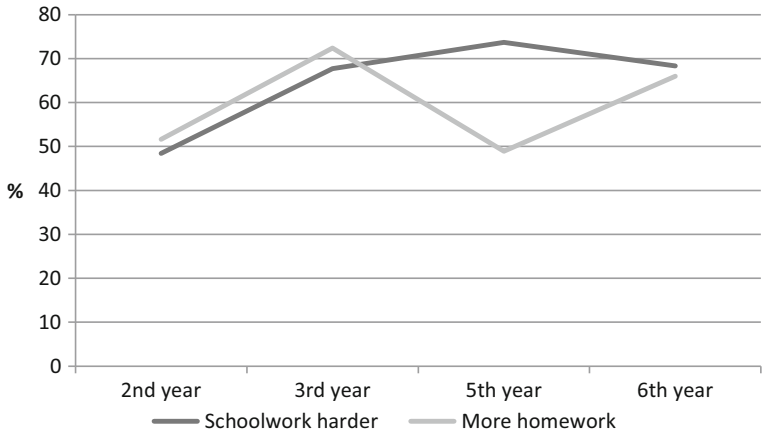

Fig. 2.1 Comparison of schoolwork ('harder') and homework ('more time') with the previous year

through the school system; the increasing difficulty of schoolwork is greatest from third year (Junior Certificate year) onwards. The student cohort was also asked whether they spent 'more time', 'about the same', or 'less time' on homework and study than in the previous year. The pattern is quite different to that for academic challenge, with an increasing investment in time on homework over the course of lower secondary education but an abrupt drop in time on homework over the transition to upper secondary before a sharp rise again in sixth year (see Chap. 7 for further information on the actual amount of time spent on homework and study). Thus, investment of time in homework and study appears not to reflect increasing academic challenge per se but instead peaks in the exam years. This pattern is not perhaps surprising given that the nature of the exam system rewards time spent on study (see Smyth et al., 2011).

This figure shows the pattern for all students in the case-study schools but important differences are evident when we consider the impact of social class and gender, indicating the importance of taking account of both dimensions of differentiation. For the sake of simplicity, Fig. 2.2 illustrates the patterns of finding schoolwork 'harder' for middle-class (professional) and working-class (semi/unskilled manual and non-employed) groups by gender. Schoolwork is seen as increasingly challenging for all groups as

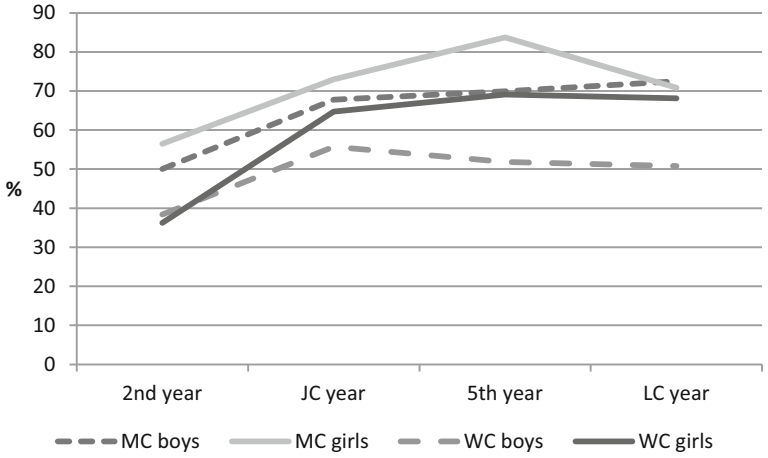

Fig. 2.2 Comparison of schoolwork ('harder') with the previous year, by gender and social class

they move through lower secondary education. The move from first to second year is more demanding for half or more middle-class students while levels of perceived demand are somewhat lower for their working-class counterparts. The subsequent move into the lower secondary exam year results in an increasing difference between working-class girls and boys. Working-class girls report higher levels of demand than their male counterparts, and come to resemble middle-class boys in their responses. Middle-class girls report a greater 'step up' over the transition to upper secondary education than other groups. What is clear from the figure is the greater differentiation in the experiences of working-class boys, only half of whom experience their school career as involving escalating demands.

In terms of relative time on homework and study, all groups follow the pattern of a greater increase in investment in exam years with more modest increases in fifth year. However, the scale of change is different across groups. Middle-class girls show very high increases year on year in time spent on homework and study (Fig. 2.3). Interestingly, as with schoolwork demands, the pattern and scale of change are very similar for middle-class boys and working-class girls. Less than half of the working-class boys report increased investment in homework at any point in their school career.

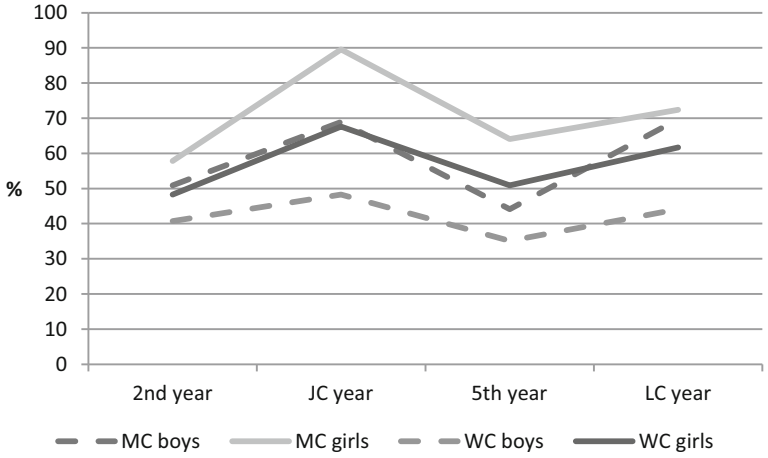

Fig. 2.3 Comparison of homework ('more time') with the previous year, by gender and social class

To what extent does their experience of schoolwork feed through into their perceptions of themselves as learners and into their attitudes to school? The measure of academic self-image was based on the following statements, adapted from measures used for the ORACLE project (see Galton et al., 1980; Hargreaves and Galton, 2002)[6]:

- 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)

Figure 2.4 shows that young people become less confident about themselves as learners as they move through the school system, a decline that is evident for both boys and girls and across different social classes. Boys are slightly more confident about their ability to cope with schoolwork than girls through all phases of the schooling career. There is a slight widening of the gender gap over the transition to upper secondary level, which is in keeping with the greater academic demands reported by female students (see above).

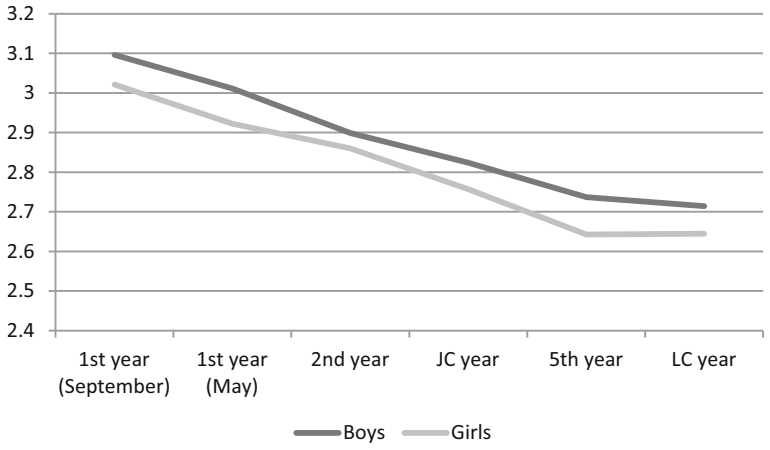

Fig. 2.4 Academic self-image by gender

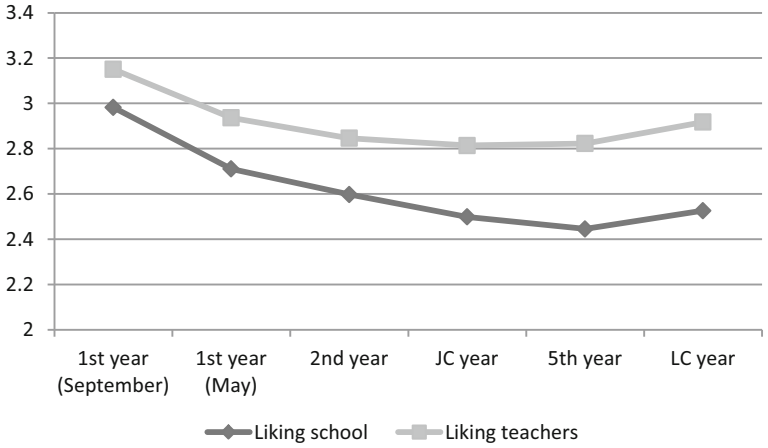

Fig. 2.5 Attitudes to school and to teachers over the course of secondary education

Figure 2.5 shows two scales measuring attitudes to school and to teachers as young people move through the school system. The extent to which students were considered to like school was derived on the basis of the statements (also adapted from project ORACLE measures)[7]:

- 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.

The measure of liking teachers was based on the following statements[8]:

- 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.

Although the transition to secondary education poses a number of challenges to young people (see above), the beginning of first year is found to represent a 'honeymoon period' in the extent to which they like school and their teachers. Thereafter, we see a downward trend in their attitudes until the end of lower secondary education. Attitudes to school continue to decline over the transition to upper secondary education but recover slightly in the final year of school (but only to a level equivalent to that found in third year). In contrast, attitudes to teachers are not only broadly stable over the transition to upper secondary but also recover in sixth year. It is worth noting that students tend to be more positive about their teachers than about school(work) and this gap increases over time. It is also worth noting that these trends contrast with those found in many other systems (see e.g. Wang and Eccles, 2012), where there is a continuing decline in attitudes to school over the transition to upper secondary education. The extent to which this 'recovery' in school engagement found in the Irish context is due to factors such as school climate will be explored in the subsequent chapters of the book.

This figure of course shows average patterns across all students in the case-study schools. There are indeed important differences between groups of students. Girls are more positive about school than boys, though this gender difference is not significant at the very beginning or end of secondary education. Gender differences in liking teachers are more marked than in attitudes to school, with significant differences between girls and boys evident from the end of first year onwards. Variation in attitudes by individual social class background is not consistent over the course of secondary education. However, school social mix is a more important driver of attitudes to school than individual class background, with the most positive attitudes found in middle-class schools, the least positive in working-class schools, and socially mixed schools falling in between. Attitudes to teachers are more positive in middle-class schools than in other schools only from third year onwards.

But to what extent are there distinct turning points in young people's perspectives on schooling? The study findings point to the complex interplay of transition points, developmental trajectories and turning points. Despite the research and policy focus on the transition to (lower) secondary education, it is apparent that in many ways the transition to upper secondary education poses greater academic challenges. The social aspects of the transition seem more straightforward but, as will be outlined in

Chap. 5, fundamental tensions emerge for young people in navigating the roles of 'child' and 'adult' within and outside school. A good deal of international research has pointed to the downward trend in school engagement over the secondary years (see e.g. Wang and Eccles, 2012). While some elements of this trend are evident in the study cohort, it is also apparent that the direction is at least partly structured by the nature of the educational system, particularly by the division between lower and upper secondary levels. Rather than turning points, it is perhaps better to frame the discussion in terms of critical phases. In this respect, second year emerges as a critical phase in shaping later outcomes. Those who struggle to cope with schoolwork (i.e. have a more negative academic self-image) in second year achieve lower exam grades at both the lower and upper secondary levels, all else being equal. In contrast, academic self-image in first year appears to be influenced by adjustment to new subjects and teaching styles and is not predictive of later outcomes in the same way. Patterns of interaction with teachers and misbehaviour in second year similarly influence later academic performance (see Chap. 4). Attitudes to school and educational aspirations in second year are likewise predictive of the likelihood of staying on in school until the end of upper secondary education.

Conclusions

This chapter has looked at the way in which the structure and phases of the Irish educational system have shaped young people's experience of school. International research has emphasised the importance of the transition to lower secondary education in fostering longer term student outcomes (see e.g. Hargreaves and Galton, 2002). While the current study documents the turbulence and challenges associated with moving from primary to secondary school, the analyses point to a number of areas that have been previously neglected in research on educational experiences. Firstly, the findings show the way in which the adjustment required of young people moving into secondary education may, in fact, obscure important differences in school engagement. In particular, a focus on first year transitions may lead to an underestimation of the size of the gender gap in school engagement. In fact, second year emerges as a critical phase in young people's schooling career, with increasing differentiation found in academic challenge and investment in homework, reflecting the interplay of gender, individual social class background and school social mix. Indeed, second year experiences emerge as setting the tone for young people's success

within and beyond the school system, a theme which is revisited throughout the remainder of the book. Secondly, the study findings point to the importance of taking seriously the challenges faced by young people over the transition to upper secondary education. While previous studies have emphasised the 'mismatch' in curriculum between primary and secondary levels (see e.g. Galton et al., 1999), at least in the Irish context, there appears to be a very pronounced escalation in academic demands between related subjects at lower and upper secondary stages. In spite of these demands, young people appear to become somewhat more positive about school over the transition into and through upper secondary education. The extent to which this reflects other factors such as school climate will be discussed in Chaps. 4 and 5.

Notes

1. At the time of writing, phased reform of junior cycle is being implemented, though highly contested; further discussion of these reforms is provided in Chap. 8. The description of junior cycle structure in this chapter relates to that in operation for the cohort of young people under study.
2. The term 'messing' is used by staff and students alike to refer to minor misbehaviour such as 'kidding about', talking during class, and other low-level disruptive behaviour.
3. These are 'mock' or practice exams held three to four months before the actual exams (see Chap. 7).
4. In this case, all students except those taking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme took TY.
5. Those who had taken TY were asked to compare their experiences to those in third (Junior Certificate) year to allow for comparison with students who had made the transition directly.
6. The scale is highly reliable (0.75).
7. The scale derived is highly reliable (0.78).
8. The scale has a reliability of 0.73.

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CHAPTER 3

Educational Decision-Making

As students move through secondary education, they are required to make a series of decisions—about the subjects they take, about the levels at which they take subjects and about what they will do after leaving school. This chapter presents detailed information on the way in which young people make these choices and on the consequences of their decision-making for later outcomes. In particular, the chapter assesses the relative role of parents and school-based guidance in supporting young people's decision-making.

Guidance in Irish Schools

Guidance personnel are allocated to Irish secondary schools on the basis of student enrolment, with small schools having only a part-time guidance counsellor.[1] Some schools also use other resources to pay for additional guidance hours (McCoy et al., 2006). Guidance counsellors have a teaching background but receive specialist postgraduate education for their role. Their duties combine an educational guidance function (e.g. advising on subject and post-school choices) with a counselling remit (providing personal and social support for students with emotional difficulties). Because of limited resources, educational guidance tends to be directed towards giving advice on post-school options, especially the HE application process, for final year students (McCoy et al., 2006;

E. Smyth, *Students' Experiences and Perspectives on Secondary Education*, DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-49385-9_3

McCoy et al., 2014). As a result, there tends to be less availability of formal guidance to support the transitions to lower and upper secondary levels:

> I think it's one of the criticisms of the guidance counselling provision in schools in Ireland at the moment, that it's all geared towards leaving school and very little towards coming into school. (Guidance Counsellor, Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class)

However, there is considerable variation across schools in how they provide guidance to students.

The case-study schools varied in their approach to guidance, in the extent of access to group (class) and individual (one-to-one) sessions, in the provision of information sessions on issues such as subject choice, and in the involvement of school principals and subject teachers in giving informal advice to students. The way in which this variation shapes young people's educational decision-making is explored in the remainder of this chapter.

Subject Choice at Lower Secondary Level

At both lower and upper secondary levels, students in Ireland are required to study English, Irish and Maths and to take a number of other subjects (typically eight others for the Junior Certificate and four for the Leaving Certificate). While schools operate within a common curriculum framework (see Chap. 2), they have some discretion over the number and type of subjects they provide. Schools have been found to adapt their provision to the perceived needs of the student body. While such responsiveness can be seen as positive in that it attempts to adapt the curriculum to suit the interests of young people, it can also embed notions of what is 'appropriate' for boys and girls and for different social or ability groups (Darmody and Smyth, 2005). Thus, girls' schools are less likely to provide Physics or any of the technological subjects (such as Metalwork) than boys' or coeducational schools. Similarly, schools serving a disadvantaged population are less likely to offer scientific or élite cultural subjects (such as Music) at upper secondary level.

Staff in one case-study school, serving girls from a socio-economically disadvantaged area, reported that they chose to provide subjects that would be 'relevant' to the student body:

> We try to cater for the needs that these children, a lot of them coming from, you know, limited, backgrounds and we do offer a fair balance, … they would say have Art, they would have Home Economics that they can relate to, they would have Typing, they can relate to those subjects and they can see a sort of a future for them. They know coming in, well at least I understand the name of this subject and I think I will be able to handle it. Then of course Science is slightly more difficult and you find the better able would be able to go towards the Science, generally that's how it works, generally it's not too much of a problem in re-directing people. (Staff, Barrack Street, girls, working-class)

This account emphasises the need to provide subjects that are suitable for the students who are attending the school but, at the same time, can be seen as potentially reflecting lower expectations for these girls, emphasising practical subjects that they can 'understand'. The quote also highlights a potential differentiation among girls in the school between those who are 'better able' to take the 'difficult' subject of Science and those who would be better 'redirected' to other subjects.

In another school catering for boys from a mixture of social backgrounds but which positioned itself as 'academic' in orientation, one staff member pointed to the constraints placed on the boys by only offering them a particular range of subjects:

> I'm certainly dissatisfied that there is no artistic subjects on offer in it [the school] so you are closing off one complete area of their brain to begin with. … Again, we don't offer the practical subjects or neither do we advertise ourselves as doing that so I feel there as certainly pupils who are within the school who would be much, much better off where practical subjects are offered. (Staff, Park Street, boys, socially mixed)

School size also emerged as an important influence on curricular provision, with smaller schools having greater logistical difficulties in providing a broad range of subjects to their students:

> At the moment the school is getting slightly smaller and in the last two years maybe we have had to drop Technical Drawing and Music because there were very few people, there was only something like five people opted for the subject. (Staff, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class)

The case-study schools differed not only in the number of subjects offered to students but also in the way in which these choices were con-

structed. In six of the schools, students were required to make decisions about lower secondary subjects before or on entry to secondary education while in the remaining six schools, students had a chance to sample the different subjects for all or part of first year before reaching a decision. As a result, the number of subjects taken in the first term of first year varied from 12 to 17, a sizeable difference in terms of exposure to different subject areas. For students making the decision on or before entry, subject choice was addressed through an open day for incoming students and/or through an information session for parents and students at which subject choice was just one of the topics covered. Students thus varied markedly in their ability to make a choice that was informed by knowledge and experience regarding what the subject was actually like.

The vast majority of students interviewed were positive about the idea of being able to sample their subjects before making a choice. This was seen as allowing them to take subjects that suited their interests and abilities.

> It's a good idea, yeah, because at least then you're not missing out on any subjects, you do the subject you're strongest at. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

In particular, a chance to try subjects out was viewed as allowing for a more informed choice:

> We get to know what it is like before we choose it. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 1st years)

> It would be good because then you'd have your better choice, because you'd know what all the subjects would be like. (Hay Street, coeducational, working-class, 1st years)

This opportunity was particularly important where students were faced with subject options that they had not encountered at primary school:

> Some of the subjects that we wouldn't have done in primary so you need to know what they are about before we can choose them. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 1st years)

A chance to try out subjects meant that students could re-evaluate their assumptions about course content:

> When I came in here I was thinking I would do French but I don't really like French now, I think I prefer German so it's good to see which one you

> prefer and then decide after that. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 1st years)

It also increased the likelihood that they would take subjects which they would find engaging rather than taking a suite of subjects which did not suit their needs and abilities:

> I think it's a good idea to do them all in first year … but if you don't like them then you are stuck with them to the Junior Cert. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 1st years)

First year students were asked about the relative importance of different sources of advice in choosing their junior cycle (lower secondary) subjects. Parents were seen as the most important source, rated as 'very important' by 57% of students while friends and siblings were seen as much less important (rated as very important by only 22% and 19% respectively). School-based sources of advice were viewed as less important than parents at this juncture, with subject teachers (31%) being rated more highly than guidance counsellors (12%), reflecting the lack of formal guidance available to students at this stage of the school career. Parents were seen as the most important influence regardless of the approach to subject choice used in the school. However, not surprisingly, teachers were seen as a more important influence in schools with taster programmes so actual experience of the subject and of those teaching it played a role in shaping choice. The potential influence of friends was quite different in the two kinds of schools: in schools with a taster programme, 41% of students considered their friends 'not all important' in their decision, while this was the case for only 27% of those in schools where the decision was made early. While parents were deemed important across all schools, students in working-class schools were more likely to see them as 'very important' than those in middle-class schools (63% compared with 41%). Those in middle-class schools were also less likely to see their friends as important (13% compared with 30% of those attending working-class schools). Student choice at the beginning of lower secondary education is thus firmly embedded in young people's social networks, particularly their parents. In schools with a concentration of working-class students, young people appear to be more dependent on a range of sources of information than their peers in middle-class schools. It is clear too that the nature of 'choice' is strongly constructed by school practices regarding subject provision and the time at which students are required to select subjects.

When asked further in the group interviews about the reasons for picking particular subjects, students focused on two sets of factors: needing the subject(s) for particular courses or jobs in the future and liking the subject or finding it interesting.

> Subjects that you liked and that and you needed if you knew what you were going to do. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> The ones that you like best.
> Yeah the ones that were interesting.
> Interviewer: OK, for you?
> Yeah and I chose Art because I liked it and it was good.
> Interviewer: OK, so which subjects did you choose then?
> I chose Business and Home Ec[onomics].
> Interviewer: And why did you choose those?
> I got good grades on both of them so and I thought they were interesting to do so I kept them on. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> The ones that I dropped I just hated them so I just dropped them. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 2nd years)

Doing well in a particular subject was also seen as a basis for choosing to pursue it:

> We kind of judged like how good we were at each one.
> And which would benefit us the most. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

Although parents were the main source of advice for young people, students rarely highlighted a direct influence of parents on the subjects chosen, though it was acknowledged that:

> Sometimes your parents might influence it a small bit. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

The way in which 'choice' was sometimes narrowly framed by school practice along with limited knowledge of the content of subjects among students (and perhaps their parents) meant that by third year, many students expressed regret about the subjects they were taking. In addition,

for some subjects, the number of students allowed to take a particular subject was limited, meaning that not all students obtained their preferred choices:

> I didn't get the subjects I wanted to do because there was too many people wanted to do Art, I didn't get that. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

The absence of detailed formal guidance regarding subject choice meant that some students reported receiving misleading information about what certain subjects would actually be like:

> They didn't exactly explain it to us really well like or go through exactly what was going to happen. They just said right now you have to pick two subjects and just say Metalwork and Woodwork, they were like explaining what you'd be making and stuff but they didn't say that there's going to be theory or anything. Like they never mentioned to us in Home Ec[onomics] that there was going to be, that after Junior Cert it was all just going to be theory, no cooking at all. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 3rd years)

Over half (58%) of the cohort reported that there were subjects they would have preferred to have taken while a similar proportion felt that they would preferred not to have taken one or more of their current subjects. Students in schools where they had been required to select subjects on entry to first year were more likely to indicate that there were subjects they would have preferred not to have taken (63% compared with 51%), suggesting that making an informed choice reduced but did not by any means eliminate the likelihood of making the wrong choice. Regret was also more common among students who had relied heavily on their friends as a source of advice.

Programme Choice at Upper Secondary Level

Although the Irish educational system is relatively undifferentiated (see Chap. 1), young people leaving third year are faced with two sets of choices, depending on the school they attend: whether to take TY or not and which Leaving Certificate programme to take. Of the twelve schools in this study, only seven provided TY, with four

allowing students a free choice as to whether they took the programme or not (see Chap. 2). Young people who take TY tend to be more academically engaged and have higher educational aspirations (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). Among the study cohort, young people's motivation for taking TY centred on the desire 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, girls, working-class, TY)

Other factors included the opportunity to engage in a variety of activities, including trips, to sample different subjects before selecting those to be taken for the Leaving Certificate and whether their group of friends were taking the programme, although the latter was not a decisive factor. Age emerged as a factor for both participants and non-participants. Some young people felt they would be too young and immature on leaving school if they did not spend the extra year in school:

> 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, girls, socially mixed, TY)

On the other hand, some students felt that, if they took TY, they would be 'too old' on leaving school:

> 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, girls, socially mixed, 5th years)

Age was not the main motivation in not wanting to take the programme. Instead, the desire to finish school as quickly as possible was a dominant reason, especially but not exclusively among those attending working-class schools:

> 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, girls, working-class, 5th years)

> 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, coeducational, socially mixed, 5th years)

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 (LCA) programme. In practice, the LCE and LCVP are very similar and cannot be really regarded as distinct programmes; the LCVP differs in specifying that students take particular combinations of Leaving Certificate subjects as well as two 'link modules' on enterprise education and preparation for the world of work. In contrast, the LCA, introduced in the mid-1990s to cater for young people who would have difficulties with the traditional Leaving Certificate, is a stand-alone programme, consisting 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 the combination of continuous and exam-based assessment.

Not all of the case-study schools provided all three of the Leaving Certificate programmes. 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. Only five of the schools provided the LCA programme, and these schools had introduced it to promote student retention and facilitate those students who struggled with the demands of the existing curriculum:

> 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. (Staff, Lang Street, boys, working-class)

> 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. (Staff, Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed)

Neither of the middle-class schools provided the programme, mainly because they saw a lack of demand for it among their student cohort:

> 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. (Staff, Harris Street, girls, middle-class)

While the working-class schools were more likely to provide LCA, not all did so, partly because of a concern with being labelled as not providing the same quality of education as other schools:

> 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. (Staff, Hay Street, coeducational, working-class)

Among the cohort of all students entering fifth year (either directly or having taken TY), the majority (69%) went into the LCE programme, a quarter went into LCVP while just 6% took the LCA programme. Considerable overlap was found between LCE and LCVP entrants in terms of social background, prior experiences of school and prior achievement levels, reinforcing the idea that these are not stand-alone programmes with distinct student profiles. However, those taking LCA were very different from the other groups in their profile: they were less likely to be from professional family backgrounds, had lower levels of prior achievement, were more likely to have received learning support at lower secondary level, had lower educational aspirations and had higher levels of misbehaviour.

As with lower secondary subject choice, parents emerged as the most important source of advice and support in choosing an upper secondary programme, with three quarters seeing their mothers as important or very important in this respect. Friends were cited by around half of students as important. Subject teachers emerge as an important source of help for around half of students while the guidance counsellor is seen as important by four in ten students. Almost all of the schools hold information meetings for parents regarding programme and/or subject choice; the excep-

tion 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. 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. The reasons for choosing LCE centred on it being the most advantageous programme in terms of access to different post-school pathways:

> 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, boys, working-class, 5th years)

Those taking the LCA programme were less vocal about the reasons for choosing the programme, with a mixture of responses centring on not feeling they would be 'able' for the traditional Leaving Certificate and having had the programme suggested to them by school staff.

Subject Choice at Upper Secondary Level

Students take fewer subjects at upper secondary level than they do at lower secondary level, meaning there is potentially more scope to drop subjects in which they have no interest or find too difficult. Young people were generally required to choose their upper secondary subjects before the end of lower secondary education. In some schools, however, students were allowed to postpone subject choice until late in TY, in effect using the programme as a form of 'taster' for subject selection. The nature of the choice also varied across schools. In six of the schools, students were given an open list of subjects to rank in order of preference. 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.

> 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, girls, middle-class, 5th years)

Subject choice appeared to be more restricted in Barrack Street and Dixon Street, both small- to medium-sized 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.

> I had my heart set on doing forensics and I needed Chemistry and Biology and I was told I wasn't allowed do it. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 5th years)

When asked about sources of advice at this stage, parents again played a dominant role. This time young people were asked about their mother and father separately, and mothers were seen as playing a somewhat more important role than fathers. Subject teachers and the guidance counsellor were each rated very important by about one in six of the group. Thus, formal guidance appears to be playing a slightly greater role as students move through lower secondary education. Young people were less likely to rate any of the groups as 'very important' than they had two years previously, suggesting greater independence among students regarding their decisions at this point in their school career.

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 [Differential Aptitudes 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, coeducational, middle-class, TY)

> You could make an appointment with [the Guidance Counsellor] if you wanted to talk to him about subjects and he told you then what he thought was best and give you advice.

Interviewer: And was it one on one?
Yeah there was like three of us there but you could say, you could go to him by yourself if you wanted to. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 3rd years)

In contrast, other young people emphasised the lack of formal guidance available to them:

She [the Guidance Counsellor] handed out sheets.
They are talking to our parents, they are not talking to us at all. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 3rd years)

Several students were critical of the timing of subject choice, in some cases indicating they would prefer to choose after they had received their Junior Certificate results while in other cases, young people felt that they were too young to choose a pathway that would influence their later lives:

I hate the way you have to pick before you get your results, what subjects you're gonna take because I'd rather just get me thing, know what I'm bad in and then know what to get rid of and what to take up. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 3rd years)

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, coeducational, working-class, 5th years)

As at lower secondary level, the bases for choosing specific subjects reflect both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, 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.

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, girls, middle-class, 5th years)

Friendship groups appeared to be less important in subject choices than in influencing whether to take TY or not, 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, coeducational, socially mixed, 5th years)

The perceived difficulty of a subject played a role in choice processes for some young people:

> Interviewer: Why do people want to do Geography?
> Because that's the easiest. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 5th years)

Students who did not take a particular subject at lower secondary level expressed reluctance to take up this subject for the first time at upper secondary level, 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, girls, working-class, TY)

Taking TY meant that some students could reflect on their relative performance in particular lower secondary subjects in making choices for Leaving Certificate level:

> 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, girls, middle-class, 5th years)

Chapter 2 highlighted the increase in academic demands experienced by young people over the transition to upper secondary education. Part of this difficulty was related to not feeling fully informed about what particular subjects would be like at Leaving Certificate level:

> 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, girls, socially mixed, 5th years)

> 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, boys, socially mixed, 5th years)

By sixth year, their final year in secondary education, the majority (four-fifths) of students were satisfied with the subjects they are taking. Students who had taken TY were somewhat more likely to be satisfied with the subjects they were taking than those who had not (85% compared with 77%), reflecting the way in which TY can be used to sample subjects before making final choices. However, a more complex picture emerges when students are asked about subjects they regret taking or would have preferred to have taken instead. Over half (58%) of students regret taking one or more of the subjects they are studying, with this pattern being more common among the middle to lowest achieving groups. Similarly, over half of students indicated one or more subjects they would have preferred to have taken for the Leaving Certificate. This was somewhat more prevalent among male than female students (58% compared with 53%). Students who had taken TY were somewhat less likely to regret having taken any subjects (54% compared with 60%) or to prefer to have taken another subject (53% compared with 57%). Coupled with the findings on subject satisfaction, this appears to suggest that TY facilitates students taking subjects that better match their interests and abilities. The consequences of the 'wrong' subject choice became more apparent as young people approached the end of their schooling career and realised that they did not have the subjects they needed to access particular post-school pathways. This issue is discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

Choosing Subject Levels

At both lower and upper secondary levels, young people are required to choose whether to sit the exam in particular subjects at higher or ordinary level. The study findings provide new insights into whether these selection processes reflect real choice on the part of students. Chapter 6 will document the way in which streaming practices in six of the case-study schools constrain the degree of choice young people have over their subject levels, with those in lower stream classes usually allocated to ordinary or even foundation level. Even where schools had mixed ability base classes, access to higher level subjects varied in approach and timing. Staff in the case-study schools emphasised that subject levels at lower secondary level were generally based on negotiation and discussion between the subject teacher and the student.

> The subject teacher decides that [the level] with the child … I suppose we try to base it on the marks with the girls themselves, nobody forces anything on them, but they look at the results again and how the teacher feels about them during that third year and the teacher will advise them then on whether they should [take a specific level]. (Teacher, Barrack Street, girls, working-class)

> They more or less decide themselves, but I advise them, that you're not really the honour standard this year or last year and I would recommend ordinary level. Some of them if they were struggling with the higher level they'd make their own decision to go to ordinary level but if I thought that there was [a problem], I'd discuss with a parent; if there was a query over a level, we'd just talk about it. (Teacher, Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class)

In five of the case-study schools, key personnel stated that, as far as possible, all students were expected and encouraged to take higher level in their exam subjects. All of these schools were middle-class or mixed in their social intake:

> It is assumed straight off that most of them are going to do honours level at Junior Cert cycle. But then through the years you'll obviously find children who are struggling and they will do pass. But the vast majority of children here take honours in most of their junior cycle subjects unless there's a very obvious weakness, except … in Irish … and … Maths. (Teacher, Harris Street, girls, middle-class)

> I think the teachers try to promote the honours paper right up till the very end, even right throughout the Mock exams. (Teacher, Wattle Street, boys, socially mixed)

In third year, students themselves were asked about the basis on which it was decided whether they took higher or ordinary level, initially using Maths as an example. Around a third of young people reported having no say in the Maths level they took, a pattern that was not surprisingly most common in (but not limited to) schools using streaming.

> We didn't decide.
> They [the teachers] told us.
> They decided for us, we wanted to decide for ourselves like. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, lower stream class, 3rd years)

Among those who reported having a choice, parents emerged as the most important source of advice. Although the Maths teacher was seen as an important influence in helping students to make their decision, students were somewhat more likely to report receiving advice from their parents. Only a small proportion felt their friends were very important in helping them decide while the guidance counsellor was deemed very important by only a very small group of students, again reflecting the lack of access to formal guidance at lower secondary level. The group interviews with students provided further insights into the processes involved, with some schools 'rationing' higher level places to those who had achieved a particular grade in their previous exams:

> Everyone over a C is in honours. (Wattle Street, boys, socially mixed, 3rd years)

There was some fluidity in the levels at which young people took subjects over the course of lower secondary education, but students referred more often to 'dropping down' in a subject as curricular differences posed a constraint to 'moving up':

> If you didn't feel like you were doing well enough, you could drop down. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 3rd years)

> So like my Maths teacher told my Mam that I should have been put into honours in first year and now it's too late because they have done all the stuff in Maths. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 3rd years)

The survey data point to sharp declines in the proportion taking higher level Maths and Irish between second and third year as young people approach the State exam. There is also a decline in higher level English take-up but from a much higher base. Students from working-class backgrounds were more likely to drop higher Irish, English and/or Maths than students from non-manual backgrounds. School social mix also played a significant role: for example, 65% of students in working-class schools dropped from higher level Irish compared with 12% in mixed/middle-class schools. Furthermore, just over half of students in working-class schools dropped higher level Maths compared with just over a tenth of those in mixed/middle-class schools.

In keeping with the accounts of key personnel, students in several schools catering to socially mixed or middle-class intakes reported a strong emphasis on taking higher level across all subjects:

> They [teachers] would go what do you want to do, and if you say like pass they go oh well I think you are able for honours. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 3rd years)

> In first year after your exams you get divided into honours and pass Irish and honours and pass Maths and then the other subjects you kind of take on as honours unless you find them difficult. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 3rd years)

> Everyone was encouraged to do the higher level for the Mocks [practice Junior Certificate exams]. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 3rd years)

The extent to which school approaches to the choice of subject levels influence actual take-up in the Junior Certificate exam is discussed further in Chap. 6.

Case-study schools also differed in the timing and flexibility of subject levels available to upper secondary students. Subject level take-up in fifth year was strongly influenced by the levels taken in, and experience of, relevant subjects at junior cycle as well as by the grades received in the Junior Certificate exam. As at lower secondary level, some 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, coeducational, socially mixed, 5th years)

> 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, girls, working-class, 5th years)

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, coeducational, socially mixed, 5th years)

> Like if you done foundation Maths in the Junior Cert you do foundation level now. (Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 5th years)

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, boys, working-class, 5th years)

> Interviewer: And how is it decided who does honours and pass?
> Teachers advise you on what they think but you pick yourself. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 5th years)

Finding a subject difficult emerged as a common motivation for dropping levels between lower and upper secondary education:

> I'm doing pass English because I just could not do honours. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 5th years)

> 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, coeducational, middle-class, 5th years)

The proportion of the cohort dropping levels was found to vary across subjects, with almost four in ten of those who had taken higher level

Maths for the Junior Certificate moving to ordinary or foundation level. The equivalent figures were one-fifth of students for Irish and only one-tenth for English.

As with subject choice, 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. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 5th years)

Young people can decide on the level at which they take subjects right up until the day of the Leaving Certificate exam. In practice, however, their decision is made at a much earlier stage. Between fifth and sixth year, a further group of students 'dropped' levels because they found higher level too difficult:

> At the start of this year I moved down to pass Irish. I just chose myself, I didn't like it.
> Interviewer: So did teachers have any say there as well?
> Yeah, they tried to convince me but I said no, I want to move down to pass. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

Persistence in taking higher level subjects was largely related to obtaining the 'points' necessary for HE entry, with higher level subjects seen as giving an advantage in securing access to preferred third-level courses

> A huge difference between higher level and ordinary level points.
> It depends what you want to do.
> Points for certain things like you need, say for primary teaching or P.E. teaching, you need to have higher Irish and you need to get a C1 at least, you know. So if you are doing pass Irish, that course is out the window.
> Yeah, it's gutting that way.
> Like a C in honours is like 60 points whereas it's only 15 in ordinary level.
> A huge difference. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

> It matters in the end though because you need the points, if you're going for the points and all, you need to do the high subjects, don't you, so it matters to you but no one else really. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

Considerable variation is evident across the case-study schools in the average number of higher level subjects taken for the Leaving Certificate, ranging from a low of 0.9 in Hay Street, a working-class coeducational school, to a high of 4.6 in Fig Lane, a middle-class coeducational school (Fig. 3.1). The final column in the chart shows the average for all schools nationally for the purposes of comparison. There is a clear difference between working-class schools and those of socially mixed or middle-class intake, with students in working-class schools taking much fewer higher level subjects than those in other schools. The average number of higher level subjects taken is higher in the two middle-class schools, Fig Lane and Harris Street, but the average among students in Belmore Street, a mixed intake girls' school, is comparable in level to these middle-class schools, showing that school organisation and process can also play a role in shaping student outcomes.

Multivariate modelling provides further insights into the factors shaping higher level take-up for the Leaving Certificate. Clear social class differences are found in the number of higher level subjects taken, with those from professional or farming backgrounds taking more such subjects than those from other class groups. Over and above individual social class back-

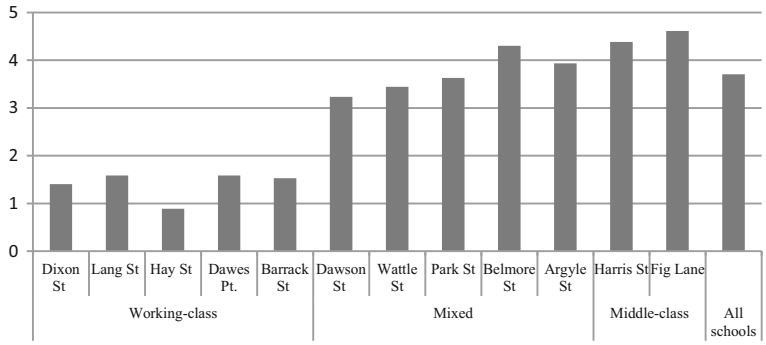

Fig. 3.1 Average number of higher level subjects taken in the Leaving Certificate exam by school and school social mix

ground, those attending schools with a concentration of working-class students take fewer higher level subjects (two less on average) than those in socially mixed or middle-class schools. To what extent do these patterns reflect prior experience and take-up at lower secondary level? Young people who had taken more higher level subjects for the Junior Certificate, not surprisingly, also have higher levels of take-up at Leaving Certificate levels. When we take account of prior take-up, most of the individual social class differences disappear, but higher professional groups still take more subjects at higher level than other students. A sizeable gap persists between working-class and other schools even allowing for their lower take-up of higher level subjects at Junior Certificate level. The average grades received in the Junior Certificate exam also account for differences in take-up of higher level subjects. However, this explains only part of the difference in terms of social mix, with working-class schools taking fewer higher level subjects than those of comparable performance levels in other schools. It appears therefore that the expectational climate of the school plays an important part in facilitating the take-up of higher level subjects, with significant consequences for the options open to young people at a later stage.

Preparing for the Future

Chapter 2 has highlighted how young people in their final year of secondary education are faced not only with preparation for a high-stakes exam but with making crucial decisions about which pathways to pursue upon leaving school. In recent years, HE has become the dominant route taken by school leavers (McCoy and Smyth 2011). Midway through sixth year, at a stage when they had already completed their application form for HE, young people were asked what they expected to do upon leaving school. Figure 3.2 shows that in the socially mixed and middle-class case-study schools, the majority of students expected to go on to HE (at a university or institute of technology, both of which provide degree-level courses). This expectation was much less evident among those attending working-class schools, the exception being Barrack Street girls' school where over half of the cohort intended to go on to HE.

Further analyses allowed us to explore the interaction of individual social class background and school social mix in shaping the intended post-school pathway. Irrespective of social background, young women were more likely to intend to go on to HE than young males, a pat-

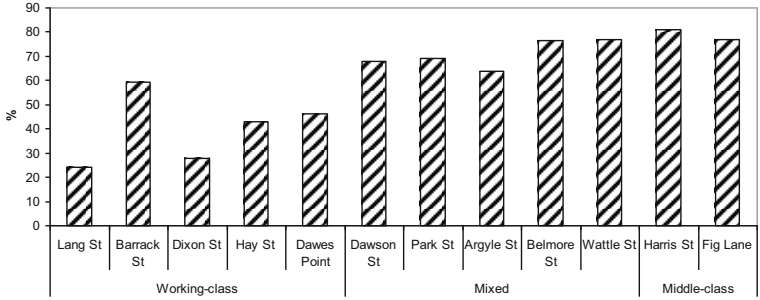

Fig. 3.2 Proportion planning to go to higher education by school

tern which reflected the actual transition rates at the time of the study.[2] Young people from professional or farming backgrounds are more likely to intend to go on to HE. For the professional groups, this pattern is related to their higher aspirations even as early as lower secondary education, their higher Junior Certificate grades and less negative interaction with their teachers at lower secondary level. Those from farm families, however, are more likely to pursue the HE option, even taking account of these lower secondary factors. All else being equal, those who attend working-class schools are less likely to intend to go to HE than their peers in socially mixed or middle-class schools. The remainder of this section examines whether these patterns are related to the nature of guidance within the school or to other aspects of school climate.

Formal guidance provision is greater for sixth years than for any other year group. The vast majority of students report having had a guidance class, typically four or more by midway through the school year. Around half of students have had a one-to-one session with the guidance counsellor with almost half having two or three such sessions. Young people were broadly satisfied with the guidance they had received, especially with the one-to-one sessions which were seen as providing tailored advice and information.

> My guidance counsellor, she helped me, she showed me all the different booklets on the different colleges and she knows a few people that are in the different colleges. And she found [name of institute of technology] is the best so I'm going to apply for that. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 6th years)

> I knew exactly what I wanted for me to do after for college like and … she started telling me all the good things and bad things about doing it and then it totally changed my mind. And I seen what it was like so then I changed my mind, she was telling me the good things about doing it, so then I have a proper clear vision of what I want to do. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 6th years)

The guidance classes often focussed on completion of the Centralised Applications Office (CAO) application for HE entry:

> They're quite helpful really.
> It is quite helpful that we did that.
> And if you couldn't do it at home they had classes in the school to do them on the computers and the teachers were there to do it with us. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

Despite overall satisfaction with guidance in sixth year, over half of the students felt that it was too early for them to decide what to do for the rest of their lives, indicating a variation in preparedness for the pathways ahead of them. Young people expressed a good deal of frustration about the limited availability of one-to-one guidance sessions, particularly in a context where they were unsure about their career direction:

> The meetings were good.
> It was so hard to get a meeting with him though.
> You have a time but then he just doesn't come or he has someone in.
> Or he's on the phone.
> So you are just standing outside his room for about half an hour waiting. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

> I think they should know each and every single person in sixth year and their lives, I really do, like there should be at least five of them or something. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

Another key theme in student discussions was the absence of guidance earlier on in their schooling career, with the result that many young people were not taking the subjects or subject levels they would require for their chosen pathway:

> In third, fourth year when you were picking your subject choices on what you need to get into certain courses that you might be thinking about doing

> because we weren't told any of that at all, when we were picking options for Leaving Cert. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)
> She gives you information about courses and like I picked my courses, or to be a wide range you know, like science and art and that kind of craic and then I was looking at the CAO form and it's like I can't do that because I don't do sciences, I can't do that because I don't do business. [We] should have got it [guidance] a long time ago like. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

> I wanted to teach and she goes you're not going to get the points. I was like but I'm going to try and she goes but you're not doing enough higher subjects, right ok, so then I just dropped that so. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

Although the majority of young people intended to go on to HE, many felt that guidance classes were too narrowly focussed on third-level options, especially form completion, and did not cover other opportunities:

> Interviewer: And what kinds of things would you cover?
> Mostly college, PLC [Post Leaving Certificate] courses and that.
> If you want to do a trade, it's no good.
> Because they don't talk about trades really.
> They don't talk about trades really you have to go and do that yourself. (Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 6th years)

> I'm not going to college either so I didn't get any attention. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 6th years)

Even those who were going on to HE felt there was an over-emphasis on the application process:

> Interviewer: What kind of things did you do in them [classes]?
> CAO, CAO, CAO.
> Just went through the CAO.
> Oh I'm sick of the CAO.
> …We spent seven weeks on filling out a CAO form. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

The amount of formal guidance provided in the school did not vary by school social mix. However, there was evidence of some difference in focus in guidance classes but more importantly in the expectations that subject teachers held for students. In one working-class girls' school, Barrack

Street, over half of the cohort intended to go on to HE but many felt that their guidance counsellor was discouraging these ambitions, suggesting instead that a further education course would be more 'appropriate':

> I can't even talk to my guidance counsellor. Just, she just puts me off every time I go to her like so I'll do it myself.
> And she shouldn't be doing that, she should be encouraging you. Like when we were doing the CAO she was like 'this is a joke I haven't seen this many people filling out CAOs in all my life'… you know … in the room.
> Basically putting you down like.
> … There was 20 of us or something and she was like 'wow this has never been like this and all'. As if to say to people like 'what are you doing this for?'.
> Like she should give everyone an equal chance like, whether you are able for it or not like. If they want to do it, let them like. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 6th years)

This framing of certain options as the 'realistic' ones was also evident in one of the socially mixed schools:

> But the career guidance counsellor always puts us down as well, like she'll tell us … She doesn't even say what if to me like, she says 'I don't think, you have to be realistic [name of student]', I go 'what do you mean realistic that's what I want, I'll work for them points if that's what I want to do'. 'Ah but you have to be realistic why don't you go for this', I don't want to go for that like, you know what I mean, because what I want to do is not in a PLC course. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

In contrast, going on to HE assumed a taken-for-granted quality in some schools, especially those with more middle-class intakes but also some of the schools with socially mixed populations. Here the discussion focused more not on whether to go to college but on which college or which course. Thus, a distinctive institutional habitus was evident in each school around the appropriate post-school pathways to be taken by students (McDonough, 1997; Reay et al., 2001, 2005; Smyth and Banks, 2012). In these schools, teachers recognised that there was an expectation among parents that the school would prepare students for college entry:

> I would say there's any expectation amongst the parents out there of me that that is a major part of my role to prepare them for applications to those places. (Teacher, Fig Lane, staff, coeducational, middle-class)

The school populations also differed in the family and other resources they had to provide them with information and advice on HE choices. Over three-quarters of sixth year students surveyed considered their mothers and fathers important or very important influences on post-school plans. However, while parents were a source of advice and support across all social groups, young people from middle-class backgrounds were more likely to have parents or siblings who had 'insider' knowledge of HE, knowledge which informed their own choices. Parents were followed in importance by the guidance counsellor at school, with over two-thirds of students rating them as important or very important. Over half of the students pointed to their friends as having an important influence. Subject teachers were also an important influence on a sizable group of students, while tutors and year heads played a less important role at this stage.

Students attending working-class schools were much more reliant than those in mixed or middle-class schools on school personnel, namely, the guidance counsellor, subject teachers and class tutors/year heads, in deciding on a future direction. For these students, the guidance counsellor was as important an influence as their mother. Students in working-class schools were also more reliant on their friends than those in other schools. It would appear therefore that, in the absence of family-based knowledge of the educational system, especially of HE, young people in more disadvantaged school settings seek out a range of sources of information to decide on their future.

Occupational Aspirations

As well as asking the study cohort about their immediate intentions upon leaving school, young people were asked annually about their occupational aspirations. They were asked both about the occupation they would ideally want to do (idealistic aspirations) and the occupation they would settle for (realistic aspirations). In this section, we focus on young people's idealistic aspirations as they move from second to sixth year. Previous research on occupational aspirations has generally focused on the level of jobs aspired to rather than the nature of those jobs. Social class has been found to have a significant effect on the level of aspirations, either directly or indirectly through educational attainment (Schoon et al., 2007). However, there has been little consensus about whether aspirations among young people differ by gender, with findings varying across countries and over time. Mello (2008), for example, found that females in the USA were more

likely to expect to enter a professional job than males at all time points between the ages of 14 and 26. Similarly, in two large UK birth cohort studies, females were more likely than males to aspire to professional jobs at the age of 16 (Schoon et al., 2007). Taking a longitudinal perspective, some studies have found that the level of aspirations is established relatively early on (around the age of 14) and is relatively stable thereafter, with young people becoming 'locked into' a particular level (Rowjewski and Hill, 1998; Rowjewski and Kim, 2003). Other researchers have highlighted the way in which occupational aspirations decline as young people become older, reflecting a growing realism and awareness of having to compromise their ambitions (Furlong and Biggart, 1999; Shapka et al., 2006). From Gottfredson's (1981) perspective, the latter pattern reflects the fact that young people circumscribe their ambitions to take account of the range of options realistically open to them.

Figure 3.3 shows the proportion of young people in the study cohort aspiring to higher professional jobs, the most élite positions within the occupational hierarchy. From second to fifth year, there is an increase in the proportion aspiring to these prestigious occupations with a marked decline by the final year of upper secondary education, most likely reflecting a greater realism about the options open to them. Throughout the course of secondary education, there is a significant gender gap, with males more likely to aspire to higher professional jobs. Trends are similar

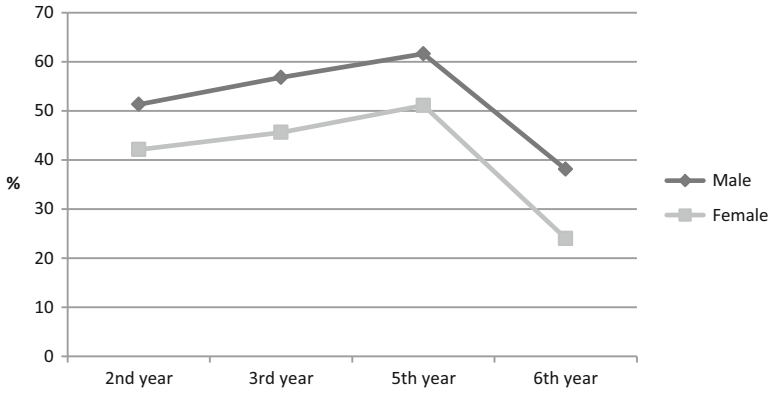

Fig. 3.3 Proportion of young people aspiring to higher professional jobs over time

for both girls and boys, with a slight narrowing of the gender gap in the final year of schooling. As might be expected, the level of occupational aspirations is significantly influenced by parental social class, with those from professional backgrounds more likely to aspire to such occupations. Interestingly, the social class gap widens in the final year of secondary education, reflecting the greater decline in aspirations among working-class youth. Thus, working-class young people are found to circumscribe their ambitions to what is 'realistic' to them given their social class context.

Looking at the level of occupational aspirations yields useful insights into the processes underlying social class reproduction. However, it is also important to examine the extent to which such occupational choices are gendered. Throughout their schooling career, at least two-thirds of male students aspire to 'male' occupations, with only a slight decline in this proportion as they move through upper secondary education (Fig. 3.4). There is a slight increase in the proportion of male students who aspire to 'female' jobs towards the end of their schooling, largely reflecting a shift in preference towards teaching, which may have been a response to the then impending recession. The pattern is somewhat different for female students. Just under half of the female students aspire to 'female' jobs in second year but this figure increases to six in ten by the end of their schooling career. At the same time, there is a reduction in the proportion of female students who aspire to 'male' jobs. In sum, the gendering of occupational aspirations is largely stable for males but increases over time for females. In keeping with circumscription theory, female students

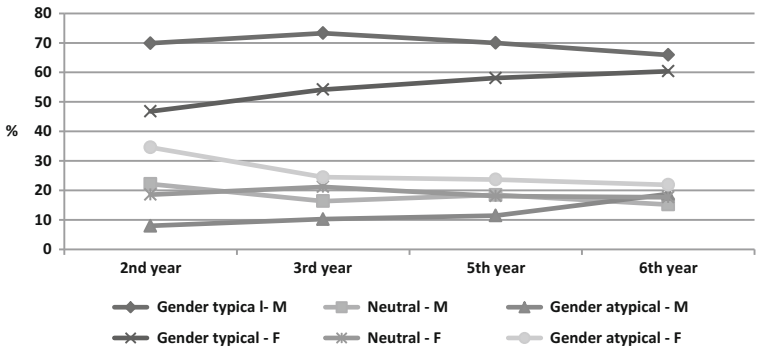

Fig. 3.4 Gender-typing of occupational aspirations

appear to reorient their choices towards 'realistic', that is, gender-typical, jobs. Interestingly, the extent to which young people choose gender-typical, neutral or gender-atypical jobs does not vary significantly by their social class background, highlighting the importance of looking at both the level and gendering of occupational aspirations.

Conclusions

This chapter has examined the kinds of choices young people are faced with as they move through the school system and the information they draw upon in making these choices. There is a large body of research which traces parental influences on young people's decision-making, often pointing to the role of lower expectations among working-class parents (see e.g. Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Lareau, 1987). The study findings presented here indicate that across all social groups, parents are the main source of support in deciding what subjects to take, what levels to study and what pathways to pursue after leaving school. Social class differences are found not in the extent of such parental support but rather in whether parents and other family members possess the kinds of 'insider' knowledge which will facilitate their children in navigating their way through the educational system. While many previous studies acknowledge the role of the school in providing career advice and guidance (see e.g. Foskett et al., 2008; Pustjens et al., 2004), the influence of the school has been relatively neglected in research on young people's decision-making. Findings from this study provide new insights into the nature and timing of guidance at the school level and its influence on student trajectories. More importantly, school organisation and process can shape the extent to which young people actually have a 'choice' or whether this is closely circumscribed by the school they attend or the class to which they are allocated. Early decisions about dropping particular subjects or not pursuing higher level are found to have long-term consequences by closing off particular pathways for the future. These early decisions are often made in the absence of formal guidance, thus contributing to social inequalities in young people's destinations. The study findings contribute to our understanding of the trajectories of young people's occupational aspirations and how these choices become increasingly framed by social class and gender as they approach the point of leaving school.

Notes

1. Since 2012, schools are no longer allocated guidance hours outside their quota of regular teachers and are required to provide guidance resources from within the overall package of teacher allocation.
2. The gender gap in higher education entry in favour of females has closed somewhat subsequently as the absence of employment and apprenticeship opportunities during the recession led to an increased percentage of young men embarking on third-level courses.

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CHAPTER 4

School Climate

The affective domain has often been neglected in educational research (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). More recently, however, emerging work has begun to recognise the crucial role of emotions in the education of children and young people (Roorda et al., 2011; Martin and Dowson, 2009). Relationships between teachers and students are a key component of the emotional landscape of a school. This chapter looks at school climate, that is, the quality of interaction between teachers and students, contributing to a new understanding of how this interaction changes in response to the presence of high-stakes examinations. The chapter highlights the impact of school climate on a broad range of student outcomes, including exam performance, school retention and personal/social development. The chapter also considers the way in which negative relationships can fuel as well as be fuelled by student misbehaviour within the school, with analyses providing a fresh perspective on how gender and social class are reproduced in the interplay between misbehaviour and school sanction.

Teacher–Student Interaction

Throughout their secondary school career, young people in the study cohort were asked a number of questions about the nature of their interaction with teachers. These questions formed two scales: positive interaction, which assessed the frequency with which students received praise or

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positive feedback from teachers, and negative interaction, which measured the frequency with which students were reprimanded or told off ('given out to' in Irish terminology) by teachers either in relation to schoolwork or for misbehaviour. The format of the questions was similar across years so that we can examine the way in which the quality of interaction changes as students move through the system. Figure 4.1 shows that the beginning of first year represents a 'honeymoon' period, with students receiving much more praise than censure from teachers. As students move through lower secondary education, the frequency of praise and positive feedback declines while the incidence of negative interaction increases. These patterns closely reflect the structuring of school experiences described in Chap. 2. Although young people express some anxiety about the transition to secondary education, the encounter with a new set of teachers and school subjects is largely a positive one. However, by second year, a pattern of drift and disengagement sets in for some students, with a resulting decline in the quality of teacher–student relationships. This pattern is further reinforced in third year with the focus on exam preparation and the necessity to 'cover the course' for teachers and students putting pressure on the relationship. The transition to upper secondary education marks a period of change in teacher–student relations. While praise and positive feedback are on the whole less frequent than at lower secondary level, levels of reprimand are much lower, as teachers allow greater independence for (at least some) young people as learners, a theme that is further explored in Chap. 5.

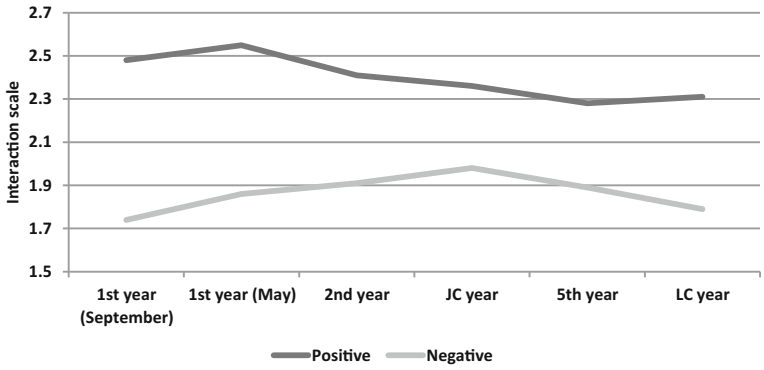

Fig. 4.1 Frequency of positive and negative teacher–student interaction by year group

While the educational system structures experiences for all students, significant differences are evident between groups of young people. In particular, the nature of school climate emerges as highly gendered—boys and girls experience similar levels of positive interaction but boys are much more likely to experience negative interaction than girls across the whole of their educational career. The extent to which this gender gap reflects different levels of misbehaviour will be discussed further below. Individual social class background and the school social mix also play an important part in structuring school climate. No social class differences are found in levels of positive interaction with teachers. However, young people from working-class and non-employed backgrounds experience much higher levels of negative feedback from their teachers than their middle-class peers. Furthermore, schools with a concentration of working-class students have quite different school climates than other schools, having greater levels of both positive and negative interaction. This pattern suggests greater surveillance, positive and negative, in working-class schools.

The quality of relationships with teachers was a dominant theme in the group interviews conducted with students across all year groups. Even when the interviewer asked about other issues, students returned time and again to catalogue incidences of unfair treatment by teachers. This was especially evident in schools with a concentration of working-class students, where many students felt that teachers held low expectations for them and consequently did not treat them with a great deal of respect. A stark example was evident among students in Barrack Street, a working-class girls' school, where low expectations were frequently expressed in terms of predicted lone motherhood among the girls:

> The teachers are going around saying oh you'll all be pregnant at this age you know, they don't care about you. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 2nd years)

> She said to X you're cheap and common.
> She said you're going to be pregnant when you're 16, remember.
> She said that to Y as well.
> …
>
> She told me I'd be pregnant when I was 14. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 3rd years)

This perspective was paralleled in a working-class boys' school where the boys were described as heading for unemployment and homelessness:

> Some teachers s3ay that we've no lives and we're going to be on the dole when we're 18 and all that.
> …they just put us down.
> Where are you going to be now in four years, out on the streets. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

These young people saw criticism by teachers as fundamentally rooted in a lack of respect among teachers for students in the school. Young people saw respect as a reciprocal process and thus the perceived lack of respect from teachers fed a lack of respect for teachers:

> They say in order to get what you want you have to give what you want, respect and stuff, and some of them [teachers] don't do that. You give respect to them but they don't give it to you. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 2nd years)

> A lot of teachers have a bit of craic [fun] and then some of them wouldn't.

> Strictly the rules … you won't respect them back and that's when all the messing starts. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

This process appeared to result in a mutually reinforcing dynamic of 'giving out' (reprimanding) on the part of teachers and 'acting up' on the part of students, which in turn led to further reprimands:

> Picking on every single detail like.
> Small bit of noise and they make a big deal.
> … Yeah, you'd make even more noise then like.
> It's like they are living in the past or something, you know. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 6th years)

> Because when they give out to you you can't concentrate, well I can't. …
> You just won't work for them because they're roaring at you. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 3rd years)

> What we're after doing in the last class now we're after changing the desks around and throwing desks around the place and throwing the chairs on the ground, throwing the desks all over the place, that's over [Teacher X].
> Because he's annoying us, he's blaming us for nothing. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

> I'd be nice to the teachers if they'd be nice to be but if they are not going to be nice to me I'm not going to be nice to them you know what I mean. Like calling you 'you' and all that. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 2nd years)

While such views were more commonly expressed in working-class schools, they were not confined to these contexts, with girls in one of the middle-class schools similarly highlighting the dynamics of (dis)respect in (some of) their classes:

> Because if the teacher is like just giving out to you the whole time you don't want to do things for her and it turns you off.
> Yeah, you want to get at the teacher even.
> Yeah, you just don't want to listen just to get at her, not to get at her but like, you know, just annoy her. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

> Like some teachers have no respect for us and we'd have no respect for them, you know, so it's really a two-way thing. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

The quality of relationships between teachers and students varied between schools and among teachers in the same school. In addition, perceived favouritism was seen as resulting in very different treatment of students in the same class:

> If a teacher didn't like someone now and they didn't have their homework done they'd get killed and if someone that he liked didn't have their homework done he'd just say do it the next day, that's unfair. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

> And if they like you they would ask you all the questions and if they do not like you they would completely ignore you. They expect you to know everything if they like you and they expect you to know nothing if they do not like you.
> And some teachers if they hate you they would pick on you. And you are just leave me alone.
> You are not doing anything and you are getting blamed for something.
> Like loads of people are talking but they pick one person to go to the back of the classroom like. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 2nd years)

The counterpart of such favouritism was the labelling of some students as 'troublemakers', with students feeling that such labels could follow them throughout their school career:

> Some teachers just kind of set something against you, if you do something wrong once then they hold it against you for the rest of the year. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> When you're in trouble by one teacher it goes around the whole teachers and you get taken out and then they explain things to you right 'cos your name has been taken down like, I'm not bothered now.
> …
> You feel like do something wrong, it will go round like teachers, but there's no point like you know, if you get a bad name, it's hard to get your good name back. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 2nd years)

Many students reported that such unfair treatment was rooted in unequal power relations between teachers and students, an issue which is explored in greater detail in Chap. 5:

> We were in religion the other day and a girl got in trouble but then when she was saying something back to her like the teacher was saying like don't even go there like so you can't say anything without them saying that you're answering them and all.
> …
> But you could never win against a teacher. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 2nd years)

Discipline Policy in the School

The micro-politics of the classroom must be seen in the context of the broader discipline policy at school level. Lynch and Lodge (2002) have described the strong emphasis on monitoring dress and appearance in Irish secondary schools, in a context where schools generally have uniforms and often very specific rules on appearance. Such uniform policies reflect the historical legacy in specific schools, with some adaptation over time, a very different motivation from the emphasis in US schools on using school uniforms as a basis for broader school improvement and rebranding (see e.g. Yeung, 2009). Lynch and Lodge's research highlighted the greater surveillance of girls' appearance. Similarly, girls in the case-study schools pointed to the restrictions on their appearance and the requirement to wear skirts:

Wearing a uniform is stupid, I hate having to wear a skirt all the time. Yeah, I think it's real sexist just because we're girls we have to wear a skirt, it's like old-fashioned. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

The uniform is horrible.
…
I don't like the skirt.
…
You have to have your tie on and shoes.
Interviewer: What are the right shoes?
Black.
No high shoes. I had to get around four pairs of different shoes over this school.
…
You have to wear the skirt.
Other schools have trousers. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 1st years)

The skirt has to be a certain height.
And you're not allowed like wear your scarf or anything. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

However, findings from the current study suggest that monitoring of appearance is also common in boys' and coeducational schools.

They're very strict about necklaces and that and if you wear a chain they can take the chain off you and they put it away and they don't give it back to you.
…
You're only allowed to wear one ring on each finger and no chains at all and if you are wearing a chain you have to have it hidden, so they don't see it, because they don't want to see it but all the teachers wear as much jewellery and chains and it's not really fair that we can't do the same.
And if it's raining outside you have to have the school jacket, you can't have another jacket and if you don't have the school jacket it's just tough. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 1st years)

You can't be an individual person… some people wear individual clothes and get haircuts but you can't do that.
Yeah, you can't shave your head.
But lots of people do it.
You can't put colours in your hair.

> I was going to bleach my hair during the summer but then I found out I couldn't. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

Monitoring and strict enforcement of uniform policy often ended up in the application of sanctions to students, which could in turn fuel further misbehaviour:

> Exams as well, I got thrown out of two exams, in the middle of an exam because I didn't have this yoke, the fleece. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 3rd years)

> You end up on detention if you don't have it [the uniform]. (Hay Street, coeducational, working-class, 3rd years)

Even from early in first year, students were clear about the sanctions for different forms of misbehaviour and the cumulative nature of such sanctions (similar to Raby's 2010 description of 'escalating consequences'), with many schools using a 'staged' approach with sanctions becoming more severe as misdemeanours accumulated:

> You keep getting stages and then you get expelled.
> Interviewer: What are the stages?
> It builds up and when you get to 4 you are suspended.
> …
> Your class tutor and year head gives you a warning and then the third stage your parents are called and they come in and talk about it with the headmaster and then the fourth stage you are suspended for a few days and then the fifth stage you are expelled.
> ....
> If you are at one stage you get detention, two stages your parents are called and detention and third stage you are suspended and then fifth you are expelled. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

> Well first you get a bad tick.
> If you get that twice you get detention or something. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 1st years)

What was notable from student accounts was that similar sanctions could be applied to very different forms of misbehaviour. Thus, for example, students in Park Street pointed out that:

> Whoever hits someone gets detention.
> When you are late you get a late stamp and when you are late you have 10 minutes detention. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

Sanctions could also be imposed for not doing homework and indeed extra homework could itself be used as a sanction (see below):

> If you miss it [homework] 3 times in a row you get detention. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

Interestingly, in one working-class school, students highlighted the use of financial penalties for some 'offences':

> If you get caught with your phone it is 20 Euro. If you get caught with chewing gum it is 10 Euro. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 1st years)

Student accounts highlighted the fact that not all teachers applied the school discipline policy in the same way and that sanctions could be applied for very different forms of misbehaviour. The following section draws on data from the student surveys to look at variation in the frequency of misbehaviour and the receipt of sanctions from the school.

Misbehaviour and School Sanctions

Earlier in the chapter, we looked at how the nature of interaction between teachers and students changed as young people moved through the school system. In addition to being asked about the quality of interaction with teachers, students were asked to indicate the frequency with which they had engaged in various forms of misbehaviour and received punishments as a result of this misbehaviour. Misbehaviour encompassed a variety of activities, including being late for school, being absent from school, 'messing' (kidding around) in class, and truanting from school. Punishment ranged from getting into trouble for not following the school lines and receiving 'lines' or extra homework as punishment to more serious sanctions such as detention and suspension (temporary exclusion). The majority of young people were late for school on at least one occasion, and the likelihood of being late for school increased somewhat over the transition to upper secondary level (Table 4.1). 'Messing' in class (i.e. low-level dis-

Table 4.1 Misbehaviour and school sanctions by year group and gender (% reporting at least one occasion)

		1st year	*2nd year*	*3rd year*	*5th year*	*6th year*
Behaviour						
Late for school	Male	68.7	75.7	72.7	75.1	77.9
	Female	58.6	61.2	62.8	69.7	65.0
Messed in class	Male	81.2	87.6	87.5	85.9	85.2
	Female	68.0	79.9	78.6	75.8	72.8
Truancy	Male	10.1	20.2	28.0	40.2	47.9
	Female	16.8	14.4	17.6	32.1	24.7
Sanctions						
Got into trouble for not following school rules	Male	68.6	76.1	72.1	72.9	67.4
	Female	46.8	56.4	58.9	53.3	47.2
Lines as punishment	Male	65.0	69.6	60.3	40.7	29.7
	Female	27.0	29.1	23.8	23.4	9.0
Extra homework	Male	50.6	62.2	56.7	47.8	35.3
	Female	26.4	34.6	27.6	18.8	12.1
Detention	Male	43.9	56.0	51.9	39.2	35.9
	Female	23.2	24.8	28.9	20.5	18.0
Suspension	Male	10.7	12.2	15.7	13.5	13.8
	Female	3.9	5.4	4.2	4.5	3.4

ruptive activity such as talking and joking) was the most frequent form of misbehaviour, with the vast majority of young people, even girls, reporting doing so on at least one occasion. As being absent from school may reflect illness as well as voluntary absence, truancy is likely to provide a more reliable measure of misbehaviour than attendance. It is evident that truancy increases as young people move through the school system, with a very significant increase in prevalence over the transition to upper secondary level. It is perhaps surprising that certain kinds of misbehaviour increase as young people move into upper secondary education, not only given that they are approaching a high-stakes exam with consequences for their future life chances but also that a number of young people with very high levels of misbehaviour had already dropped out of school by this stage (see Byrne and Smyth, 2010).

What is striking is the highly gendered nature of school-based misbehaviour (Table 4.1), in keeping with the patterns found in many international studies (DiPrete and Jennings, 2012; Smith, 2006). Boys are more likely to report misbehaviour on at least one occasion, and more likely to

report multiple incidents, than girls. The gender gap is greater for truancy than for messing in class or being late for school. Overall, levels of misbehaviour tend to be higher among working-class students, again in keeping with international research (Goodman and Gregg, 2010; Segal, 2008; Smith, 2006), though these social class differences are not evident in the final year of secondary education. In the US context, schools with higher proportions of students from economically disadvantaged families have been found to have more disruptive behaviour, all else being equal (Arum and Velez, 2012). Some types of misbehaviour, especially truancy, are much more prevalent in schools with a concentration of working-class students. However, it is worth noting that messing in class does not vary significantly by school social mix and, in fact, prevalence is, if anything, slightly lower in working-class schools. Thus, the current study findings point to the need to consider the way in which gender, individual class and school social mix interact differently to produce distinct forms of misbehaviour.

Surprisingly, there is a sharp contrast between trends in the prevalence of misbehaviour as reported by young people and the extent to which they indicate receiving sanctions for such behaviour. In contrast to the increasing levels of truancy and being late for school, the proportion of students getting into trouble for not following school rules plateaus over the transition to upper secondary level for boys and even decreases for girls (Fig. 4.2). Both boys and girls are less likely to get into trouble for not following rules in sixth year compared with earlier years, with the exception of first year which can be regarded as a 'honeymoon period' in teacher-student interaction (see above). There is a striking decline in the use of 'lines' as punishment over the transition—from 60% in third year to 41% in fifth year for boys (Fig. 4.3). Furthermore, detention is much less frequently used as a school sanction at upper secondary level than had been the case in lower secondary education. However, the use of the more serious sanction of suspension remains at a relatively stable level over the transition to upper secondary education.

As indicated above, there are marked gender differences in levels of school-based misbehaviour. An even sharper gender divide is evident when school sanctions are analysed. Even by their final year of secondary school, boys are 1.4 times more likely to report getting into trouble for not following school rules than girls. They are 3.3 times more likely to receive 'lines' and three times more likely to receive extra homework. In terms of the more serious sanctions available to school staff, they are

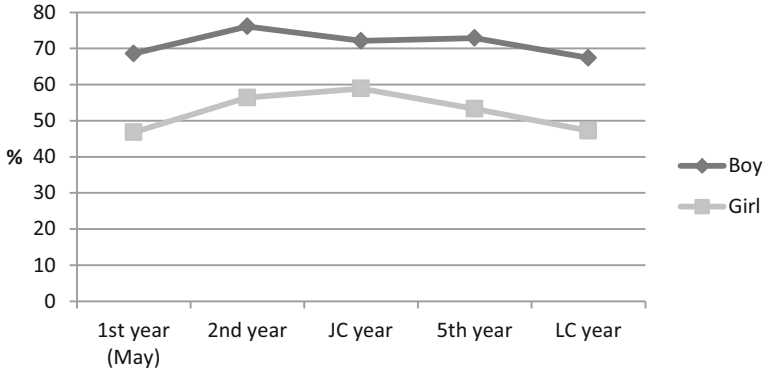

Fig. 4.2 Frequency of getting into trouble for not following the school rules on at least one occasion, by gender

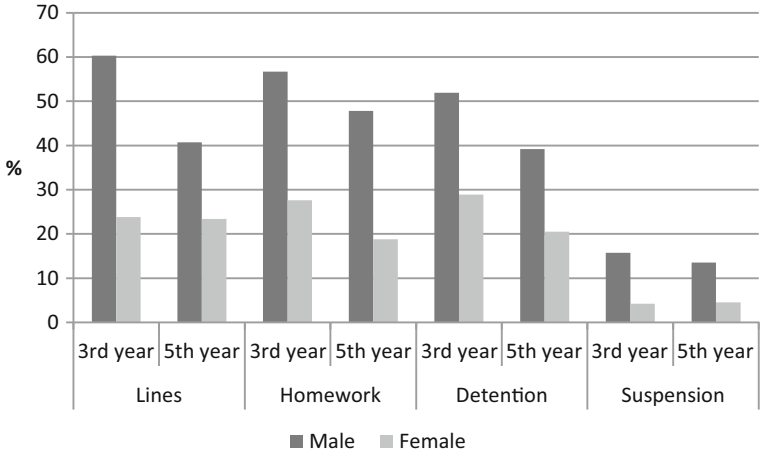

Fig. 4.3 Changes in frequency of receipt of sanctions between 3rd and 5th year, by gender

twice as likely as girls to receive detention and four times more likely to be suspended from school.

The use of sanctions also differs significantly by the social mix of the school. Middle-class schools are much less likely to give 'lines' as punishment than mixed or working-class schools. They are also less likely to give

extra homework as punishment. The use of detention is much more common in working-class schools; for example, two-thirds of young people in working-class schools received at least one detention period in second year compared with a third of those in mixed or middle-class schools. The use of suspension is also much more common in working-class schools, with very low levels of usage in middle-class schools. It is worth noting that a sizeable proportion, one-fifth to one-quarter, of young people in working-class schools were suspended from school each year over their secondary school careers. Student accounts indicated the impact on the class of such suspensions, with young people in one lower stream class reporting that:

> There's 13 of us but only 8 of us in today.
> …
> The rest are suspended.
> …
> There's always nearly one out every day. (Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

Students who had themselves been suspended often made light of this sanction regarding it positively as time away from school:

> If you don't do the rules you're in detention. You don't go to detention you get suspended.
> Yeah and if you get suspended then you're off school again then as well.
> …
> It's good because then you're off school.
> It's good (laughs). (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 2nd years)

To what extent do these gender and class differences in sanctions reflect actual levels of misbehaviour? Multivariate analyses were conducted to examine the extent to which receiving detention varied by gender and school social mix, even when the frequency of misbehaviour (being late for school, getting into trouble for not following school rules and truancy) was taken into account. Figure 4.4 shows the net difference between girls and boys, and between those in socially mixed or working-class schools compared to those in middle-class schools. Girls are about half as likely to receive detention as boys across the school years, even taking account of their lower levels of school-related misbehaviour. Except in first year, young people attending working-class schools are significantly more likely to receive detention, all else being equal, with a markedly higher differen-

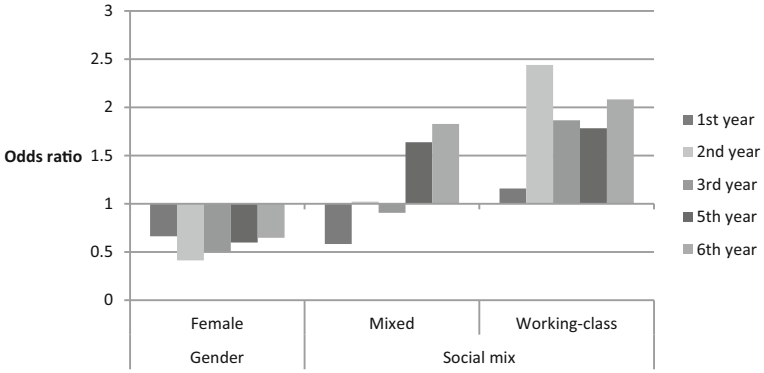

Fig. 4.4 Influence on gender and school social mix on receiving detention, by school year (odds ratios) (Note: The figures in this table derive from a series of logistic regression models assessing the influence of gender and school social mix on the likelihood of receiving detention, controlling for self-reported misbehaviour)

tial of 1.75–2.5 times compared to those in middle-class schools. Those in socially mixed schools resemble their middle-class counterparts at lower secondary level but are significantly more likely to receive detention after the transition to upper secondary education.

The analyses thus show that school-based misbehaviour is gendered and classed but that school strategies for dealing with such misbehaviour appear even more strongly structured by the gender and social class of the student population. This pattern would appear consistent with the emerging literature on the disproportional application of school sanctions for some groups of young people. These studies show that boys tend to be highly over-represented among those excluded from school (McCluskey, 2008). Other studies have shown higher suspension and exclusion rates among ethnic minority students and those with disabilities (especially emotional–behavioural difficulties) (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Skiba et al., 1997; Krezmien et al., 2006). On the basis of the evidence presented here, working-class boys would appear to experience disproportional sanction compared to other groups of students. What is novel about the findings presented here is the marked change in school approaches to sanctions as young people move into upper secondary level. The extent to which this may reflect a change in the hierarchical

nature of power relations between teachers and students as young people mature is discussed in the following chapter.

Consequences of School Climate

The chapter so far has examined the quality of the relationships between teachers and students, placing this in the context of the school disciplinary climate. This section explores the consequences of school climate, that is, the day-to-day interaction between teachers and students, for a range of student outcomes.

Although student retention has increased markedly over time in Ireland (Smyth et al., 2015), a sizeable group—around one in six—of the young people in this cohort study dropped out of school before the end of upper secondary education. Given the importance of the Leaving Certificate as a gateway to post-school education and high-quality employment, early school leaving tends to result in, at best, unstable, low paid employment and, at worst, long-term unemployment (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). In keeping with international research on school completion (see e.g. Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993), early school leaving is more common among those from working-class backgrounds. The current study findings also point to the crucial role of the social class composition of the school in shaping retention patterns, with higher rates of drop-out in working-class schools, all else being equal. Even taking account of social class background, gender and academic achievement on entry to secondary school, young people who had experienced more negative interaction with their teachers were more likely to drop out of school, a pattern that was mediated by the level of their educational aspirations and the time spent on homework and study. Thus, negative interaction with teachers contributed to early school leaving in large part because students disengaged from investment in study and lowered their aspirations for the future. Being allocated to a lower stream class, a practice more common in schools serving working-class populations (see Chap. 6) was strongly associated with early school leaving, with young people in these classes 2.5 times more likely to drop out than those allocated to mixed ability classes.

In follow-up interviews with the cohort of young people who dropped out of school (see Byrne and Smyth, 2010), negative relations with teachers was a dominant theme in their account of why they left school. These young people often felt misunderstood by teachers, indicating that they felt teachers put them down or ignored them.

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

> I didn't really get that much help like when I was sitting there, like say for Maths, I sat at the end and I was calling for help and then she'd just go to the next person. (Ian, Dixon Street, upper secondary leaver)

Others felt that they had been labelled as 'troublemakers' at a certain stage in their school career and that label had persisted despite any of their efforts:

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

Earlier sections of the chapter highlighted an emerging dynamic between teachers and students, with young people feeling they were treated unfairly, reacting by acting out and receiving further reprimands or sanctions from teachers. This negative dynamic culminated in early school leaving among several young people:

> I'd never cooperate with any of the teachers in the class or anything and once they came into the classroom they'd be like 'sit down the back', and I'd sit down the back with nobody, on my own, so, and then that made me worse. So I just started hating them. Then I wanted to leave.
> …
> You'd have a teacher and say we didn't like her so we just say right we'll mitch [truant] and come back after lunch or something, you know. (Isobel, Barrack Street, lower secondary leaver)

> I wasn't allowed into any of the classes that's why I left it probably…
> Interviewer: Ok and why was that?
> Just being bold and messing. (Brian, Dixon Street, upper secondary leaver)

In some cases, punitive sanctions such as suspension were the 'last straw' in escalating conflict between teachers and students:

> I kept getting thrown out of classes and all and I just hated it and I hate that school so I wouldn't go back to it..... I was grand [in first and second year] but when it hit third year I didn't like it at all, so I just left, I hated it, first year was alright, then it went to second year and then I started getting kicked out of classes and then I got suspended. (Elaine, Dixon Street, upper secondary leaver)

> I didn't really leave, I was just kicked out.
> Interviewer: Oh right. And when did all this happen or why did it happen?
> Just told not to get suspended again and then in fourth year, a couple of days in, I just got suspended again, that was it, they said they just don't want me back. (George, Dawson Street, upper secondary leaver)

For young people who stayed on in school, the nature of their interaction with teachers also shaped their experiences and outcomes to a significant extent. Teacher feedback placed a crucial role in forming young people's self-confidence as learners. Praise and positive feedback from teachers were associated with enhanced academic self-image (self-confidence) while frequent reprimands were associated with reduced academic self-image. These relationships held even when taking prior ability/achievement into account, so were not explained by teachers giving more positive feedback to higher-achieving students. Taking account of a range of other background and school factors, young people who had experienced negative interaction with their teachers in second year received lower grades in the Junior Certificate exam taken at the end of third year. This influence persists even when taking into account the extent of negative teacher–student interaction in third year, suggesting that second year is a crucial period in setting the tone for student–teacher relations. Over and above this influence, those who reported more misbehaviour in third year tended to receive lower exam grades. Interestingly, the level of positive interaction with teachers did not explain variation in exam performance, indicating that a more negative climate is more salient in student experiences of school.

Negative teacher–student interaction in second year is also found to have a significant impact on Leaving Certificate performance. This influence operates indirectly through lower secondary performance. Thus, young people with negative relationships with their teachers achieve lower exam grades at the end of lower secondary education, and these grades are associated with lower exam performance two to three years later. Given the importance of Leaving Certificate performance

for access to HE and employment, the findings highlight the long-term consequences of a negative school climate for young people's life chances.

Similarly, final year students who had experienced negative interaction with their teachers at lower secondary level were significantly less likely to intend to go on to HE than their peers, even taking account of their lower Junior Certificate exam performance. Thus, a negative experience of relationships with teachers served to discourage young people from pursuing other educational opportunities. Again, positive interaction with teachers did not make any difference to these intentions. A follow-up study of this cohort of young people (McCoy et al., 2014) confirmed that those who had experienced negative interaction with their teachers were much less likely to go on to any form of post-school education or training.

The quality of teacher–student relationships influences not only academic outcomes but also other aspects of young people's development. Young people who experienced higher levels of positive interaction with teachers were less likely to report feelings of isolation within the school. The study found relatively high levels of exam-related stress among young people in the run-up to the Leaving Certificate (see Chap. 7 and Banks and Smyth, 2015). Having positive interaction with teachers appears to act as a protective factor in this regard resulting in lower stress levels, all else being equal.

Conclusions

This chapter has examined young people's experience of the school climate, that is, the day-to-day interaction with their teachers. Taking a longitudinal perspective reveals important changes in the dynamic of the teacher–student relationship as young people move through the secondary school system. First year appears as a honeymoon period in which positive interaction outweighs the negative. Over the course of lower secondary education, however, the frequency of positive interaction declines while negative interaction becomes more common. There is a slight improvement in teacher–student relations after the transition to upper secondary education.

The quality of teacher–student relationships has significant consequences for a range of student outcomes, both academic and developmental. Those who experience more praise and positive feedback from their teachers are more confident as learners, feel less isolated and have lower stress levels. Even stronger effects are evident from negative

interaction; those who experience frequent reprimands or criticism from teachers have poorer academic self-images, lower exam grades at both lower and upper secondary levels, and are more likely to leave school early and less likely to intend to go on to HE. Young people themselves place a strong emphasis on the role of relationships with teachers in shaping their experience of school, frequently highlighting unfair or inconsistent treatment. For working-class boys, in particular, negative interaction with teachers can fuel a negative cycle of 'acting up' and further reprimands which often culminates in early school leaving or academic underperformance.

The quality of teacher–student relationships is embedded in the disciplinary climate of the school with variation found across schools and between groups of students within the same school in rates of misbehaviour and the application of sanctions. In keeping with international research, rates of (some kinds of) misbehaviour differ by gender, social class, and the class mix of the school. However, the use of sanctions, especially more punitive measures such as detention and suspension, is more strongly structured by gender and school social mix than are actual levels of misbehaviour. Thus, boys in working-class schools appear to be subject to disproportionate levels of punishment. A novel finding is the growing mismatch between misbehaviour and related sanctions over the transition to upper secondary education. As students grow older, the frequency of being late for school and truancy increases but the application of sanctions by the school actually declines. The extent to which this reflects teacher allowances for the increasing maturity of young people will be addressed in the following chapter.

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CHAPTER 5

The Democratic Climate of the School

Chapter 4 has shown that the quality of relationships between teachers and students is a crucial influence on a range of outcomes, both academic and non-academic. The analyses also trace changes in the nature of this interaction over the course of the schooling career, with a reduction in the frequency of negative interaction over the transition to upper secondary education. This chapter seeks to unpack the reasons behind this shift by looking at the democratic climate of the school, that is, the extent to which young people feel they have a say over key aspects of school life and whether they feel treated with respect by their teachers.

Increasing importance has been attributed to the need to take account of the rights of children and young people in formulating policy (Archard, 2004). Linked to this awareness has been the growing emphasis on 'student voice' as an input into educational policy at the system and school levels (Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Robinson and Taylor, 2012; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007; Zion, 2009; see also Chap. 1). Measures to take account of student views have ranged from formal student councils to day-to-day input into lesson content within classes. However, the reality of taking account of student voice is likely to be constrained by the persistence of more hierarchical power relations between adults and children within and outside the school setting (Devine, 2002; Lynch and Lodge, 2002). Schools employ a range of sanctions which are used to 'manage' student behaviour (Ball et al., 2011;

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Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Krezmien et al., 2006; Skiba et al., 1997), and student resistance to school rules can itself be constructed as misbehaviour resulting in sanction (see Chap. 4).

A further potentially contradictory situation results from the combination of care and control functions in the school context. Irish secondary schools have had a strong emphasis on 'pastoral care', at least in part because of their religious-run origins. The support structures put in place for students vary from school to school as does the extent to which key personnel (such as year heads) take a disciplinary (control) and/or caring role. The nature of these supports raises important issues for how young people are constructed in the school setting, an issue that has received little attention in the literature to date.

The concept of 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2000) has been afforded a good deal of prominence in the debate about young people's transitions. Broadly characterised, this approach highlights the way in which the more prolonged transition from childhood dependency to adulthood independence means that the late teens and twenties now involve a period of change and exploration rather than the assumption of adult roles (Arnett, 2000, 2007). While acknowledging this phenomenon, it is also important to examine the extent to which young people who are still at school assume increasingly adult lives outside school, working part-time, being active consumers and having sexual relationships. This may lead to a growing mismatch between young people's level of control over their lives outside school and their treatment within it, an issue which is explored in this chapter.

The chapter begins by discussing the combination of care and control in support structures within Irish secondary schools. It goes on to present new insights into the extent to which young people have a say in key aspects of their lives at home and within school. The final sections of the chapter proceed to use the group interview data to examine whether young people feel they have a formal input into school decisions, through student councils, and whether teachers recognise their greater maturity at upper secondary education level by treating them differently.

School Support Structures: Care or Control?

There is an increasing use of the concept of care within educational discourse (McCuaig, 2012; Noddings, 2013), reflecting the 'emotional labour' involved in working with children and young people (Lynch, 2007). However, some commentators have highlighted the

ambiguity inherent in care work within schools, in that it can construct young people as vulnerable rather than active agents (McCuaig, 2012) and can 'contain' working-class students by emphasising care rather than academic challenge (Darmanin, 2003). In many Irish secondary schools, particularly those founded by female religious orders (Hannan and Boyle, 1987), there has been a strong emphasis on support structures ('pastoral care') for students. The orientation of the school towards student support has been found to reflect both the gender and social mix of its student population, with boys' secondary schools and vocational schools (set up to cater to working-class students) less likely to emphasise pastoral care programmes (Hannan and Boyle, 1987).

More recent school surveys in Ireland indicate that the vast majority of secondary schools nationally have support or pastoral care structures in place for their students (McCoy et al., 2006; Smyth et al., 2004). The most prevalent form of support is based on the class tutor system, with a particular teacher taking responsibility for a base class. The year head system and SPHE classes are reported as supports in a significant proportion of schools (McCoy et al., 2006). Because such support structures are rooted in the historical ethos of individual schools, they are more commonly provided in certain types of schools, particularly larger schools and girls' secondary schools (Smyth et al., 2004).

The current study collected detailed information on the personal and social support put in place for students in the case-study schools. In keeping with the national patterns, the most commonly used approach was a class tutor and year head system. From first year onwards, a tutor was allocated to each class group; in some cases, the tutor remained with the group throughout their schooling career while in other cases, personnel were rotated to cover different class groups over time. The tutor role in the case-study schools was diverse, encompassing administrative and organisational tasks, such as monitoring homework diaries, as well as a more supportive role in being the first point of contact for personal difficulties such as bullying:

> Well, first of all every morning I would take the registration for the group and I would take in notes if they were absent and check their notes on why they were absent and reasons like that. And then any notices that are to be given out on a daily basis to the tutor group, I give those out at registration. I check uniforms and I check their journals to make sure they're signed. Then if the students have any issues or any problems themselves they would

> come to me and I would deal with those, for example bullying or just anything in general that's annoying them or anything like that. (Class tutor, Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed)

> If they have a particular individual problem, they're supposed to come to you about it. (Class tutor, Dawes Point, boys, working-class)

As well as organisational and pastoral care functions, the class tutor played a part in enforcing school discipline, thus combining care and control roles:

> First thing is checking the journals in the morning and make sure they have a full uniform on. If they have been off that they have notes, if they were in trouble with a teacher then I take it to the next level, check to see if they have their punishment work done. Contact with parents, them ringing me if there is any problem, meeting parents. (Class tutor, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class)

In most of the case-study schools, the role of the year head centred on discipline, including monitoring student attendance, though they too played a role in the pastoral care of students. The year head in Harris Street, a girls' school catering for a more middle-class population, highlighted the range of activities included in the role:

> To deal with any problems that any of the second years [have], to ensure the smooth running of the year, to organise their subject choices, to deal with any problems - discipline or otherwise - that they may have and to see that they get whatever help they need. What else? In charge in particular of coordinating information to the form teachers [class tutors] and holding a meeting of the form teachers on a regular basis and coordinating with them about different activities. (Year head, Harris Street, girls, middle-class)

Compared to the class tutors, year heads generally had less direct contact with the students. Issues, particularly discipline difficulties, were referred to them by the class tutors or subject teachers and they were the usual point of contact with parents, especially where discipline problems arose:

> Mostly it's people coming knocking on my door and they'll usually have a teacher attached to them, sort of saying this guy just won't behave himself and my job is mainly on the punitive side … So it's mainly that, keeping

> a check on the attendance obviously as well … So I'd be tracking attendance, looking at their behaviour, that they have their uniforms. (Year head, Hay Street, coeducational, working-class)

> I have all their [student] files. I update their files. If they have been in trouble with teachers and discipline problems I deal with that. We have a system of yellow forms and red forms for lots of serious offences and if they get three yellow forms they get a red form and I'm usually expected to talk to them and explain to them what they have been doing wrong and give out to them really, and keep an eye on their academic progress and usually if they have problems they come to me about them. (Year head, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class)

Most of the case-study schools describe the supports they have in terms of separate role or functions. Only three of the schools had highly integrated structures where the supports were closely interlinked. In Harris Street and Dawes Point schools, there was a policy of escalating serious difficulties 'up the line'; thus, the class tutor reported to the year head who then decided if they should seek further support from other key personnel such as the guidance counsellor or whether to refer students on to outside psychological services:

> We meet every [week] … class tutors … and myself.
> Interviewer: And what kind of things would come up in those meetings?
> Everything would come up, basically what we do is we rotate [discussing] the classes … And then who we'd bring in there from time to time is the home school liaison officer or maybe the career guidance teacher or [a teacher] who is on special hours for students with difficulties, learning difficulties. … We do our best to pull all the strands together. (Staff, Dawes Point, boys, working-class)

> The main [support], first of all the form teacher, they have also like their task councillor, a Sixth Year … and very often then I will sort of then make it known to the year head and then we would decide what … to do. Normally we would either, if it's quite serious, maybe contact the parents or guardians or whatever. If we thought it could be dealt with in the school we might maybe speak to [the guidance counsellors] and try and see what the problem is. (Staff, Harris Street, girls, middle-class)

Similarly, in Belmore Street, a pastoral care team was in place which met regularly to discuss issues arising with particular students and actions which could be taken to help them:

> I would be the first point of contact if there was something going on. But I would refer back to the pastoral care committee first, and then as a group they would decide what the next procedures would be, if they needed outside intervention or if it was necessary to get someone else or whatever involved. (Staff, Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed)

As illustrated in these quotes, the guidance counsellor tended to be involved in dealing with more serious personal issues among students. However, in keeping with the pattern found in relation to educational guidance (see Chap. 3), the guidance counsellor was less involved with younger students (first and second years) than with older students. Other schools put additional supports in place for students, sometimes drawing on in-kind support from the religious order which managed the school. In Barrack Street, there was a counsellor who did art therapy with a small group of students with behaviour difficulties:

> We do have an art therapy teacher who comes in two days a week now and this is a big help [with] … some of the more problematic girls … and she does a bit of counselling with them as well. (Staff, Barrack Street, girls, working-class)

Belmore Street, a girls' school with a very mixed social intake, also provided a number of supports for specific groups of students, including a designated youth counsellor for students with personal problems who were seen on an individual and/or group basis. The development of a range of support structures in this school has its origins in the strong pastoral ethos of the school and its founders.

In addition to the formal responsibility of the year head and class tutors, many subject teachers played an informal role in providing support and assistance to students. One-third of the subject teachers teaching first year students considered themselves very involved in dealing with personal problems among first year students while almost an equal proportion did not consider themselves to be at all involved in this area. Little variation was found in teacher involvement across the case-study schools or by teacher characteristics such as gender, age or years in the school, suggesting the importance of teachers' own personalities and perspectives on their role in supporting students.

While key personnel in the case-study schools were often acutely aware of the complexity of young people's lives outside school (see below) and

expressed a good deal of care towards their students, at times the viewpoint adopted towards more socially disadvantaged groups could echo a deficit perspective, focusing on the lack of interest among students:

> Some of them already are only spending their time here, you know, they are forced by parents to do it like and they know they are not going on anyway. They'll probably scrape a Leaving Cert, they are only interested in their friendships you know or other things like that. They're not interested in further academic study. And as such like you know they'll probably have the minimum requirements for that already from their Junior Cert. … They are only filling in their time. (Staff, Hay Street, coeducational, working-class)

> There would be drug problems, there would be drink, there would be sexual activity, there would be a lot of one parent families, a lot of depression, you know, among mothers or fathers, a lot of kids living with their nannies or their uncles or their aunts. And that's why I think that there just brilliant to be able to come to school looking well, they always present themselves well. (Staff, Barrack Street, girls, working-class)

While the latter quote does recognise the difficult circumstances in which many of their female students live, the emphasis on the girls being 'brilliant to be able to come to school looking well' rather than ready to engage in learning echoes Darmanin's (2003) observation about some working-class students being 'contained by care'. This emphasis on care rather than academic challenge is all the more striking given the relatively high educational aspirations expressed by this group of girls (see Chap. 3 and Smyth and Banks, 2012a).

The case-study schools were roughly evenly divided between those where key personnel felt that students would approach them with concerns and problems and those where staff considered that students would tend not to come forward for help. In some cases, key personnel felt that those who are most in need of help are often more reluctant to seek such help:

> The children I find don't are the children who need it most and the children with the most troubled background … they've never in the three years I've had them, they've never either spoken to me or gone to one of the counsellors, they've never and they would be the people I think who would need the most. (Staff, Harris Street, girls, middle-class)

In some instances, staff felt that boys were more reluctant to talk about personal issues:

> There are lots of guys like coming in that are fairly stressed out but they're not surfacing and we're not doing anything for them. (Staff, Park Street, boys, socially mixed)

> As for pastoral issues, boys just won't talk about personal problems. (Staff, Park Street, boys, socially mixed)

The support structures in the case-study schools, particularly the roles of class tutor and year head, combine a care and control (discipline) function. This ambiguity was seen by some staff as reducing the likelihood that students would come to them for help or advice:

> What I find is a difficulty with my role is that I handle discipline as well and you know they perceive me as that then, the person who will kind of take them to task if they're out of line, the person who will be talking to their parents, the person who will be putting them on report, the person who will be recommending them for detention, so in a way that can be, you know there's conflict there then. But having said that they will and I do emphasise to them that we're there to back them up and support them. (Year head, Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed)

> Normally I think the students are more comfortable going to them [guidance counsellors] rather than the form teacher. Because they probably see us in a discipline role as opposed to sort of pastoral care so they're slow to sort of discuss home problems. (Class tutor, Harris Street, girls, middle-class)

Students themselves were asked whether they would be likely to seek help from a teacher. Young people generally made a clear distinction between seeking help in relation to schoolwork and if they needed personal advice or support. Many would go to a teacher if they did not understand something in class and required further explanation, but their willingness to do so depended on the individual teacher (see Chap. 7). Students noted that confiding in a staff member 'depends on the teacher'; 'if you get on with them', the ones who 'understand you better', 'know you', 'nice ones', 'the friendly ones', 'the ones you like' and 'the ones you can talk to':

> Yeah you can talk to her for hours and you can tell her anything, like anything, she's very nice.
> …
> She's very nice.

She's very understandable.
And she does a drugs project outside so she talks to people like that though, she knows like what not to say and that, she's very nice she is. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 3rd years)

However, most students were much more reluctant to consider discussing a personal problem with a teacher:

Not with a personal problem, like if you were stuck at school work or something, you wouldn't go them about anything apart from school work. (Wattle Street, boys, socially mixed, 3rd years)

Some felt they would be 'more comfortable' going to someone they knew well, such as their class tutor, but others felt that this would cause difficulties in terms of the teacher–student relationship:

Some people are embarrassed as well because one of our guidance counsellors is our [subject] teacher and then people are I can't tell you stuff because then I'll go to [the subject] and she'll be like, I won't be able to look at her and stuff anymore. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 3rd years)

Trust and respect emerged as key considerations in young people not wishing to seek help in the school context, with lack of trust emerging as a key constraint:

You don't want to let them know your privacy like. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 3rd years).

You wouldn't know them that well to kind of be talking about something personal kind of thing. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 3rd years).

Interviewer: And if you have more personal problems, would you go to anybody in the school?
No (unanimous).
No way.
You can't.
It gets around. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 3rd years)

Some students had very strong opinions about going to teachers with a problem as they felt that teachers would not listen to them or help them

with their problem. This pattern was more evident among boys in middle or lower stream classes, and is likely to reflect higher levels of negative interaction between these students and teachers in the past (see Chaps. 4 and 6):

> Hell no.
> No way.
> Interviewer: Why not do you think?
> They won't listen to you.
> Interviewer: Will they not? Have you ever tried?
> No.
> Kind of.
> Interviewer: And what happened?
> Nothing, they just don't care. (Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 3rd years)

> Interviewer: OK, does it mean that there isn't such a teacher that you feel comfortable with?
> No there isn't, all the teachers probably laugh at you.
> There is the class tutor, [name].
> What would you say, oh [a student's name] there is after me. (laughter)
> They'd all laugh like. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 3rd years)

This section has outlined the approaches used to providing personal and social support to students in the case-study schools. These structures largely relied on a class tutor and year head system, which combined care and control functions. This ambiguity was seen as making it more difficult for students to see teachers in a supportive role and approach them for help. Student reluctance to seek help in relation to personal problems was further solidified where there were negative relations on a day-to-day basis with their teachers and where they felt that their teachers did not respect them. The issue of respect is discussed further later in the chapter.

Adults or Children?

This section looks at the extent to which relations between teachers and students change over time to reflect the greater maturity of young people in upper secondary education. Survey data indicate that a quarter of young people report that their teachers treat them 'about the same' as in lower secondary education while over four in ten feel that their teachers are 'stricter' (most likely reflecting pressure relating to the upcoming terminal

exam). Only a third of students consider their teachers more 'easy-going'. These patterns do not vary markedly by gender, individual social class, or the social class mix of the school. There is variation across individual schools though a more relaxed interactional climate is a minority experience across all schools.[1]

The study findings provide new insights not just into young people's relationships with teachers but to the potential mismatch between how they are treated within and outside school. At the time of the survey in January of sixth year, a quarter of the young people were at least 18 years of age while around half were 17. Twenty-nine per cent of the cohort were working on a part-time basis outside school (and 40% had done so in fifth year); in addition, three quarters had had an alcoholic drink on at least one occasion in the previous two weeks. A significant proportion of students (43%) pointed to a mismatch in the standards expected of them within and outside school, seeing their teachers as stricter than their parents (29% said their parents and teachers were 'about the same' while 28% said their parents were stricter). Students from professional backgrounds were less likely to describe their teachers as stricter than their parents than those from other social classes (38% compared with 46–47%), though perhaps surprisingly no significant variation was evident by school social mix. There was considerable variation across individual schools, though this variation had little to do with the social or gender composition of the school.

There was a clear relationship between perceived school–home discontinuity and the nature of young people's social lives outside school. Among those who had not been drinking in the previous two weeks, only 29% felt that their teachers were stricter than their parents, but this figure rose to 41% for those who had been drinking 'once or twice' and 54% for those who had been drinking on three or more occasions. Those who worked part-time outside school were also much more likely to report a mismatch between home and school: 52% considered their teachers stricter while this applied for only 39% of those who did not work.

Figure 5.1 depicts the degree of autonomy young people feel they have over different aspects of their lives. It is clear that they report having much less say over dimensions of school life than over their social lives and whether they work outside school. Lack of autonomy is particularly evident in relation to what young people wear at school and the nature of school rules. In contrast, a significant proportion of sixth year students report having a 'lot of say' in the time they spend on social activities (especially at weekends), on studying and whether they work part-time.

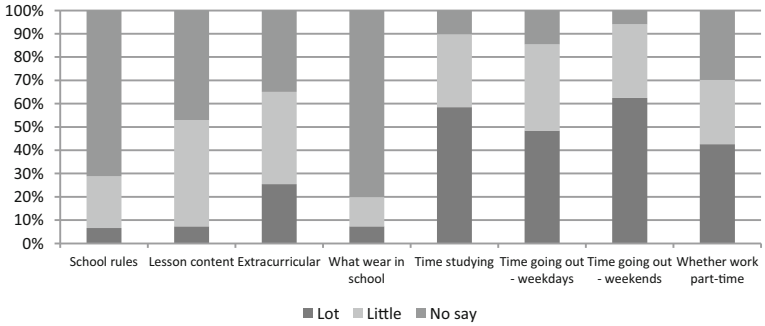

Fig. 5.1 Degree of autonomy among young people at home and school

Two scales were formed to represent school-based autonomy and home-based autonomy. Girls report more home-based autonomy than boys so there is no evidence that parents are more protective of their daughters, at least in relation to these aspects of their home lives. Boys report greater school-based autonomy than girls, a pattern that holds within schools and thus reflects quite different experiences of the school setting on the part of boys and girls. The gender difference is driven by girls being less likely to feel they have a say in influencing school rules, and even more markedly in what they wear at school (see Lynch and Lodge, 2002), than boys in the same school. Variation by individual social class is not marked. Interestingly, those in working-class schools report more school-based autonomy than those in mixed or middle-class schools but there is considerable variation across individual schools, suggesting differential democratic climates. When it comes to home-based autonomy, the dividing line is between those in middle-class schools (who report less autonomy) and all others. Those working part-time report higher levels of home-based autonomy. Similarly, those who engage more frequently in social activities outside school (but not dating) are significantly more likely to say they have greater home-based autonomy. The extent to which young people see their parents or teachers as stricter does not relate to levels of school-based autonomy but is significantly related to home-based autonomy; in other words, the mismatch between the standards of behaviour at home and school is largely driven by young people being given greater autonomy in some families.

In the interviews, some teachers reported an awareness of the increasing complexity of young people's lives outside school and the autonomy they were granted by their parents as they grew older:

> I suppose at junior cycle it can be more friends you know, in between friends, you know falling in and out with friends and that kind of thing. At senior cycle it's wider issues usually outside of school. Issues, problems that they have outside of school, family problems, some very, 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 outside, events outside school really begin to impinge. A lot of them are living pretty adult lives and a lot of them are very independent. A lot of them have to be pretty independent you know, a lot of them are given a lot more freedom than we like to think they are you know. (Staff, Harris Street, girls, middle-class)

This cohort of young people had been the first to grow up in the context of the (then) economic boom, giving them more disposable income and a very different lifestyle than was the case for earlier cohorts:

> There's more pressure on them as well too. I know it's a very affluent society at the moment but that brings its own pressures on them as well. There's a culture of drinking there at the moment. And for some students they feel they have to join in and they don't.... and there's those pressures there. They aren't there at the junior level when they are still looking to their mother and father as their role models, they are not doing that any more at senior cycle, to be honest with you. (Staff, Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed)

The extent to which school personnel adjusted their behaviour towards students in the light of this complexity represents the focus of the remainder of the chapter. More specifically, in the following sections, we further explore two aspects of the democratic climate of the school: student involvement in decision-making, especially through student councils, and the degree of respect between teachers and students, especially over the transition to upper secondary education.

Student Involvement in School Decision-Making

A study of Irish secondary school life in the 1980s indicated that students' actions were largely determined by agencies outside of their control (Lynch, 1989). Almost no schools involved students in deciding the type of subjects on offer or the nature of disciplinary procedures. Even in terms

of more marginal issues such as extracurricular activities, students were involved in helping to organise such activities in only a minority (38%) of schools and were involved in initiating new activities in only a small number (15%) of cases. Lynch's (1989) study characterised the relational context within which Irish pupils were socialised as profoundly hierarchical; students had little control over what they did in school, when they did it, or how they did it.

The Education Act of 1998 went some way towards recognising the importance of student involvement, by stating that a school board shall establish and maintain procedures which 'shall facilitate the involvement of the students in the operation of the school, having regard to the age and experience of the students, in association with their parents and teachers' (Government of Ireland, 1998). The Act provided for the establishment of student councils in schools and that these councils should be encouraged and facilitated. By 2004, three-quarters of Irish secondary schools had a student council in place (Keogh and Whyte, 2005) and, at the time of writing, such councils are near universal. Keogh and Whyte's (2005) study indicated that these student councils were seen as successful (by the council members themselves) in three out of ten schools, with four in ten seeing them as somewhat effective and three in ten as totally ineffective. There also appeared to be a discrepancy between what school management and what the students themselves felt to be the role of a student council. School management saw consultation as the main role of the student council with it also having a role as a conduit of information between staff and students. Students, however, felt that their role was to make the school a better place to be in. Senior students in particular felt that the council should try to influence management decisions. There is a clear discrepancy between the consultative role envisaged by school management and the action role envisaged by students. Teachers may be fearful that a more meaningful role for students in policy formulation may lead to a reduction in 'control'. On the other hand, students may have little faith in the student council because they want a greater involvement in decisions and to have more genuine input into the running of the school (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). Interestingly, these issues are echoed in public opinion, with the majority of adults feeling that students have too little say in what happens in the educational system (Kellaghan et al., 2004).

Not all of the case-study schools had a student council at the time of the research and in some schools, the council was only newly established. The young people interviewed were highly critical of the student council as

a way of having an input into school decision-making. The student council was described as a way of feeding student views back to school management:

> There's kind of a post box in the cafeteria that if you want to write up something about what you want to do, get done in the school, if you just post it and they say it.
> Interviewer: And is it the student council then who kind of takes it up?
> Yeah, yeah.
> Yeah at their meeting they open up the box and look at all the letters. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

In some instances, the student council had been successful in achieving practical changes in the school:

> They organise table quizzes and they organise the concert here, do different things, then they meet up with the principal with the views of the students, like they got locks in the girl's toilets and different things like that. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> Like before there was no seating in the cafeteria and they went on to the principal about it and they got seating in the cafeteria.
> And they pushed for tracksuits as well so.
> Yeah so we got tracksuits. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> I used to be in it and we'd arrange stuff to be in the school, we got lockers into the school, we'd arrange things to have like say we arranged a play ground there or something. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 2nd years)

However, any influence the student council had was seen as in relation to 'little things', with no real input into the core issues affecting student well-being:

> They have a student council but I suppose like they have a say on the little things but I'd say the principal would have overall control over it so if it wasn't wanted in the school it probably wouldn't be brought in. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

> They more organise stuff instead of kind of challenging the management, especially the uniform now this year, there does seem to be much more emphasis on the uniform.

…
Well there's a guy in the library now, he's there the whole day, he missed his French oral this morning and everything because his shirt was tucked out. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

In addition, many students felt that members of the student council were not proactive and had little say in decision-making in the school:

They don't really have much power really, they're sort of there as a figure, they don't really do much really like. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

They don't really do anything, like they don't have much power or that you know. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

The people in the student council don't do anything. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 2nd years)

The students' council does nothing. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

They say you have a say but you don't really.
They say you do but then if you come forward with an idea then they just say no, that they can't do it or something.
…
The student council.
Interviewer: What do they do?
Nothing much.
Nothing.
They say they're going to do everything but they never do. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

There's the student council but they don't do anything.
Yeah, they're so bad, they don't do anything.
The people who are on the student council are just a waste of time. (Park St, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

Young people expressed the desire to have a much greater input into decision-making within the school than they were currently afforded.

I think we need a student council though so we can have more like, a proper conversation with the teachers rather than they just telling us what we should do and really just debating about it.
And give our say to what we want and not just what the school wants or what the teachers want. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

Interviewer: Would you like to have more say in what is happening in this school?
Yeah.
Yeah.
Interviewer: Like in what areas?
Every area from canteen to sport to whatever.
About how teachers teach as well.
Yeah not just like reading out notes or whatever, just kind of interacting more. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

Like when the uniform came in, we wouldn't mind having a say on that, none of us had a say on anything, not even the seniors were able to choose when it first came in. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

However, students saw the potential to have such a say as constrained by their lack of power in relation to teachers.

Interviewer: And what would you like to have a say about?

Everything, not like everything, not being nosy being everything but like just what goes on in your classes and what like they are planning for you, like your class, you know, all that like.
We have no say in the school at all.
No, none of the students have a say, not one of the students have a say. (Barrack St, girls, working-class, 6th years)

We are not allowed to have a person on the board of management. You're not allowed do anything if you are not on the board of management so there's no point. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

Thus, hierarchical power relations meant that decisions were 'always their way or no way' (Dawson Street, 6th years):

The teachers do everything.
If we stand up to the teachers we get struck down with mighty vengeance. (Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 6th years)

> They don't consider us on an equal par as them, we're their students and we do what they say and that's the bottom line like, it's written in the rules, you do what your teacher says. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

The exception to the overall lack of control felt by students was among a group in Hay Street, who felt that the principal valued their perspective on issues:

> Interviewer: And do you find the principal listens to you?
> Yeah, yeah, he's more than happy to talk to us, talk to us to see what we want done to the school. (Hay Street, coeducational, working-class, 6th years)

Staff accounts of the role of the student council contrasted markedly with those of the students. Staff were more likely to see the student councils as active and as having an input into school policy:

> We have a student council within the school who would meet very regularly, usually once a fortnight maybe more if the need be, and they would put their suggestions forward in regards to facilities in the school, things that they have concerns about and things like that and they are very active. This year they've got new food, new food in the canteen, bought fridges, they are very proactive and very much, and eh, well, well received in the last year or two, they've got more hearing from management which is great. (Staff, Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed)

> Their opinion is sought on a lot of things because they would be seen as the representative, as a representative body for students. And so policies are brought to them, I believe that policies are brought to them when we want, you know, policies now. School policies have to be circulated to the various groups and stakeholders in the school before it goes to board of management to be ratified and rolled out as a policy. And yes the student council is the body that would represent student opinion. (Staff, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class)

> So every policy that is devised, drafted within the school, they're very much involved in every stage of it. At the drafting stage, at the negotiation stage, at the clarification stage and finally at proposal stage and then finally when it is ratified by the board it's brought back to them and re-discussed again, so there's a healthy and that's only from a student council point of view. I think

> there's an openness in the school where students can come to me as principal and discuss issues that are a relevant importance to them, and I enjoy the frank openness by which particular senior students engage in that debate. (Staff, Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class)

However, some staff did indicate that the work of the student council tended to focus on 'little things':

> The last meeting I had with them they were discussing issues like such as the school bell which was broken and we put in an alarm instead of a bell because the electrician couldn't get one, and they thought it was too loud, things like that. Maybe food in the canteen, that type of thing. (Staff, Hay Street, coeducational, working-class)

Another teacher characterised students as not wishing to assume the responsibility involved in decision-making:

> The thing is, what I would find is they have great suggestions, oh we should have this and we should have that, when they set it up they lose interest after and expect a teacher or somebody else to take over. … I would find that is the case of oh we have all these ideas but don't ask me to do anything. Or I don't want the responsibility. (Staff Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the power disparity between teacher and student was not explicitly named by staff. However, one teacher did acknowledge the potential implications for staff 'control' of taking the student voice seriously:

> We're always afraid of letting students tell us what we do … and it's like parents associations, we don't want to let parents into the school in case they take over from us, I think as teachers [they are] afraid of losing their authority. (Staff, Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed)

In sum, while most of the schools had student councils in place, young people themselves felt that this gave them little input into decision-making within the school and pointed to the power differential between teachers and students. The following section looks at how power and control play out on a day-to-day basis at the classroom level and whether the nature of interaction between teachers and students changes to reflect greater maturity among young people in the senior years.

Changing Teacher–Student Relations?

Chapter 4 indicated that over the transition to upper secondary education, there was some improvement in the nature of interaction between students and teachers, with a decline in the frequency of reprimands, a pattern that held despite an increase in some aspects of student misbehaviour. When asked to compare their treatment by teachers in fifth and third year, a third of students considered their teachers more 'easy-going' while four in ten felt that their teachers were 'stricter', with a quarter of young people reporting that their teachers treated them 'about the same' as in lower secondary education.

In keeping with the patterns described in Chap. 4, a number of students felt that school staff did not enforce minor rules to the same extent as when they were younger:

> The rules aren't that bad though when you're Leaving Cert like.
> Yeah, they don't really apply any more.
> Yeah, in all fairness. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

> Like our uniforms they're not that strict with them, [the principal] would walk by and say runners again. And she won't bother like saying get your shoes in it, she's just going, runners again.
> With the younger students she'd be more inclined to be at them but because we're in school so long I suppose she lets us off a bit. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

This shift was seen as even more evident in relation to schoolwork, with teachers increasingly emphasising students' own responsibility for learning:

> They're way softer this year.
> If you do something they're more like yeah well it's going to be your fault or it's going to come back at you when you're finished the Leaving Cert rather than me, we don't really care like. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

> They don't give out as much if you haven't got your homework done, well it's like, you were meant to do it, if you didn't do it well that's your problem. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

> But they are grand this year they treat us older as well like. You know they don't give out to us as much you know if we don't have the work done they respect that we don't have the work done like. If we have a reason like, you know. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

Several groups of students felt that the nature of the dynamic between themselves and their teachers had changed as young people became more mature, making it easier to talk to teachers 'on the same level'

> Because you're older, once you get older and you're mature, they realise that so they're sound with you. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

> Better, they're a lot more understanding.
> We're a bit older, they seem to kind of respect.
> …
> Yeah, they'd be there for you more, they talk to you a lot better, understand what you're going through. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

Others went further, emphasising that they were increasingly treated as adults (or as 'people') within the school setting:

> They treat us more like adults this year, you know, leaving it up to our own decisions really. (Hay Street, coeducational, working-class, 6th years)

> They treat you more like an adult, they wouldn't treat you like a child, because they know you're probably under enough stress as it is but like you get on well with them, decent enough like. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

> They treat you more like adults.
> People, yeah.
> They're real nice to you.
> Not as strict. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

> Teachers aren't as strict in 6th year.
> Yeah, they respect 6th years more.
> …
> They treat us as people as opposed to just like students. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

> They treat you as more of an adult, they're more; they talk to you on the same level…
> On the same level.
> Rather than talking down to you. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

However, in this description of changed dynamics, young people emphasised that it 'depends hugely on the teacher' (Argyle Street), with very different modes of interaction in different classes.

Despite many reports of being treated increasingly as adults, student accounts pointed to a fundamental ambiguity in the nature of interaction, with positive interaction in most instances contrasted against the continued presence of a hierarchical disciplinary system. Thus, (what was seen as) misbehaviour could still lead to reprimands or harsher sanctions like detention:

> When you do something wrong, they start treating you like a child and giving out to you and all that, they don't take your opinion into account.
> …
> Especially now when you're in sixth year and people are 18 and all that.
> But still they just treat you like a child if you do something wrong. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

> They say they're treating you as more mature persons and still if you don't get homework done they give you detention. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

A student in a working-class school pointed vividly to the contradiction between staff saying that they were treating them as adults and the use of the term 'bold girl' to describe them when they misbehaved:

> That shows you we are not getting treated like adults, you know what I mean. They say you are an adult now, you know but yet they are saying that's a very bold girl like. And you are saying what type of an adult would be called a very bold girl. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 6th years)

These older students expressed increasing frustration with what they saw as the arbitrary nature of school rules, especially when sanctions could mean that they missed class time and therefore the opportunity for exam preparation:

> It's a joke, stupid for Leaving Certs because we've so much to do, we want to go to school.
> And just say your pants get dirty if you're playing sport and you can't leave them on for tomorrow, you've to go up and change them if you don't or get sent home. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

> Even the full uniform, you could be sent home and in Leaving Cert you can't afford to miss a day. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

> But it's over stupid things like if you're wearing a fleece like because it's cold you have to take it off because it's not the school jacket. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

In several instances, there was a reported mismatch between the autonomy granted to young people at home and the school's invoking of 'telling parents' about misbehaviour:

> I'm 18 anyway so I can just sign my own [homework] diary just like there's no point in it like. I don't see the point if you don't do your homework or whatever they should just say to you why didn't you do it. I know they do and stuff but like you know what I mean it shouldn't be I'm going to tell your Mam, because my Mam doesn't care. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

> Like when you do get in trouble over rules in school like they should talk to you about it now that you're 18 rather than first thing they do is go to your parents about it. Because like it's not as if your parents, they can't give you that much of a lecture anymore.
> I think other schools like you are allowed because when you turn 18 you are allowed write your own notes for absences and that, but in this school you're not like. But that's just not giving us responsibility. Because once you turn 18 you know you are your own guardian and your parents don't really have a say. (Wattle Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

These young people were especially critical of the arbitrary nature of some school rules, especially in relation to uniform and appearance, rules that did not contribute to the quality of their education:

> And you're not allowed have, to grow a beard or something, you're not allowed do that, even though you're only in school 'til four o'clock and you have your own personal life after school. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

> Like it's our hair like what's that got to do with the teachers teaching you or not.
> …
> It's not going to affect my education.
> They were saying attention might be deflected towards the highlights or something (laughter). (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

> You're not allowed park in the school, it's ridiculous and I'd say the residents are getting really annoyed. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

There has been a good deal of controversy in the Irish context over parental rights to be able to send their children to non-religious schools, albeit with little recognition of the rights of children and young people to make their own choices regarding religion (see Smyth et al., 2013). Being obliged to attend religious services in Catholic schools was also a bone of contention for some students:

> When school goes to masses and stuff we are kind of made go, not knowing, like some people would be interested in religion but those who don't would prefer to do work. Rather than being forced to go to see the mass, we are old enough to make our own choice about religion. (Wattle Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

Chapter 4 pointed to changing relations between teachers and students with the approach of the Junior Certificate exam (see also Chap. 7). Some of the upper secondary students reported improved relations with their teachers in fifth year but growing tensions as they moved into sixth year, given the increased importance of exam preparation:

> Some I think I look at them different because they were really nice to us last year and then now it's Leaving Cert, Leaving Cert, Leaving Cert.
> You're kind of going where is this niceness gone. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

> They're pure stressed out though.
> They all kind of freak you at the same time.
> Angry with the lack of work or whatever they think is lack of work. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

> They can be really nice sometimes and … like when it was coming up to our exams they're trying to help us more but then again they can kind of snap at you at the same time. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

Chapter 4 described how unfair treatment by teachers was a dominant theme in student accounts of school life. In some instances, students framed their own misbehaviour as a reaction to the lack of autonomy afforded them within the school setting:

> That's why people are being like, like students are being bold because they don't get a say in anything in the school.
> And because we talk to them just the way most students do, like people walking down the corridor, you'll do this and you do that, so people are just saying who do they think they are talking to, you know. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 6th years)

Unequal power relations were seen as less tolerable in a context where young people had greater autonomy outside school. In this lengthy quote, working-class students invoke their masculinity, the fact that they are 'bigger than most of' the teachers and their resistance to being treated like 'animals' and silenced:

> Like you go into fifth year and a teacher turns around to you and tells you to shut up, by the time you're in fifth year you're 16, you're not too far from being an adult, you're not going to turn around and go take it, you're just going to go what are you saying to me like.
> And half the time you're bigger than most of them anyway.
> Yeah, we're mature like.
> Because they want respect, they want one hundred respect from you like, yeah don't back answer me, don't do that (Another student: and show us none) and then the minute they tell you anything like that they shouldn't be saying to you then it's like you say anything back you get suspended or you're getting, you can't defend yourself in any way. Like a teacher went to me a while ago, I don't want to hear your excuse, 'so what's your excuse' and I went to tell him why I was late and he went 'I don't want to hear excuses', so how am I meant to like defend myself if I can't even talk.
> Half the time you just want to run up and knock him out.
> Yeah.

> Drive him through the window the way they'd be going at you. They have no respect for anyone in the school.
> They want to be spoken to with respect, so do we, we're not just.
> We're not animals or anything like that.
> Yeah they treat you like animals after that.
> Yeah.
> Shut up and sit down, don't open your mouth like you know. (Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 6th years)

This emphasis on the need for reciprocity of respect as well as lack of respect being a trigger for acting out was also an important theme in a working-class girls' school:

> I'd be nice to the teachers if they'd be nice to me but if they are not going to be nice to me I'm not going to be nice to them, you know what I mean. Like calling you 'you' and all that. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 6th years)

> Some teachers don't, you know they say in order to get what you want you have to give what you want, respect and stuff, and some of them don't do that. You give respect to them but they don't give it to you. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 6th years)

> All they have to do is be nice to you.
> Just be nice, even talk normal like, just talk normal, but they don't even talk to you, like we're sixth years, we know how to talk to teachers and teachers should know how to talk to us, you know what I mean. But they don't talk to us.
> It's stupid.
> They still treat us like little second years. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 6th years)

These accounts show the very close relationship between the social and democratic climates of the school, with the nature of day-to-day interaction reinforcing the lack of power and control felt by many students.

Conclusions

This chapter has examined the extent to which young people are afforded a say in the school setting, presenting new material on the discrepancy in the level of autonomy afforded to young people at school and at home.

This cohort of young people was leading increasingly adult lives outside school, a lifestyle facilitated by the then economic boom which gave them the disposable income for nights out drinking and even access to their own cars. At the same time, the nature of the school system meant that they adopted an ambiguous child–adult role while at school. Young people felt they had little formal input into the key aspects of school life which impacted on them. Formal structures such as student councils were seen as playing a fairly minor role, with little say over the important issues of teaching and learning or even over rules regarding uniform and personal appearance. Students felt they would have to have a greater input and to be recognised as having a potentially valuable contribution to make. In contrast to the growing emphasis on 'student voice' in the research literature, these young people felt they had no voice and were effectively silenced.

Over the transition to upper secondary education, the frequency with which students were reprimanded by teachers declined and many young people felt they had a better relationship with their teachers, talking to them more as equals. However, this too was subject to ambiguity, with misbehaviour still resulting in the application of strict sanctions. Young people were often highly critical of the arbitrary rules imposed upon them and on the way in which contacting their parents was invoked as the ultimate sanction in a context where they saw themselves as no longer subject to parental authority in the same way. A central theme in young people's accounts was the need for reciprocity of respect between teachers and students, with lack of respect seen as fuelling student misbehaviour and disengagement from the school context.

Note

1. The exception is Park Street where the group is more or less evenly divided between those who describe their teachers as more easy-going and all others.

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CHAPTER 6

Ability Grouping

This chapter looks at the way in which ability grouping influences student experiences and outcomes. Schools vary in the way in which they allocate students to *base* classes. They may employ streaming whereby students of similar assessed ability are grouped into classes, ranked from 'higher' to 'lower'. They may use banding, a somewhat looser form of streaming, where pupils are divided into broad ability bands (e.g. two higher and two lower classes) but classes within these bands are mixed ability. Alternatively, students may be placed in mixed ability base classes; this can be based on random (e.g. alphabetical) allocation or, more rarely, schools may use ability test scores to achieve an intentional mix across classes. The chapter focuses on ability grouping at lower secondary level because rigid ability grouping is less commonly used at upper secondary level in Irish schools (see Smyth, 1999).

The first section of the chapter examines the rationale for using streaming and how the practice operates while the second section explores student experiences in higher, middle and lower stream classes. A distinctive feature of the Irish system is the differentiation between higher and ordinary levels in examination subjects (see Chap. 1). The third section explores the way in which access to higher level subjects is structured across schools, contrasting schools that use streaming with those that use a looser form of ability grouping. The final section of the chapter examines the impact of ability grouping on student outcomes, in particular, their likelihood of

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remaining in school until the end of upper secondary education and their performance in the two high-stakes examinations, the Junior and Leaving Certificate.

Why Do Schools Use Streaming?

There is now a large body of research internationally on the use of streaming and tracking in schools. In much of the literature, the terms 'streaming' and 'tracking' are used interchangeably (Letendre et al., 2003). Tracking refers more properly to the allocation of students to different kinds of courses or tracks, usually, academic and vocational tracks. Thus, in Germany, for example, at the end of primary school students are allocated to different educational pathways, vocational or academic, depending on their academic achievement levels (Bol and van de Werfhorst, 2013). In the USA, tracking is often used to refer to students taking different kinds of courses within the same school but it is sometimes employed to highlight the fact that some students take courses at more advanced levels than others (Gamoran and Mare, 1989; Lucas, 1999). In the UK and Ireland, the term 'streaming' or 'ability grouping' is more often used and reflects the fact that students may take subjects at different curricular levels (Ireson and Hallam, 2001). Ability grouping is often used to encompass both streaming (a more rigid form of grouping in which students take all subjects from Maths to Physical Education in the same 'higher' or 'lower' stream class) and 'setting' (a more flexible form of grouping whereby students may be in a 'lower' group for Maths but not for English). As will be clear from the remainder of this chapter, the two types of ability grouping result in very different consequences for student outcomes.

Much of the international research on ability grouping focuses on the consequences for students, especially the effects of allocation on academic achievement. Students in lower ability classes are found to be exposed to less demanding work and as a consequence make less academic progress, have lower educational aspirations, and are more likely to drop out of secondary school than those allocated to higher ability classes (Boaler et al., 2000; Gamoran et al., 1995; Kerckhoff, 1986; Oakes, 1985; Werblow et al., 2013). Given that working-class and minority group students are more likely to be allocated to lower ability groups, streaming is found to increase levels of social inequality between students (Gamoran and Mare, 1989; Oakes, 1990). The rationale for streaming has been subject to much less scrutiny than its consequences, though Oakes et al. (1992) relate it to

schools assuming that student abilities are fixed on entry while Gamoran et al. (1995) describe it as an organisational response to student diversity. If this is the case, then one might expect that the extent to which schools have heterogeneous student populations would influence whether they used streaming or not. Indeed, one study of US high schools indicates that more elaborate tracking systems are used in schools that are larger and where incoming students have greater variation in test scores (Kelly, Price, 2011). Their research shows no relationship between the prevalence of tracking and the socio-economic composition of the student body. This topic has been relatively neglected in other research but the analyses presented in this chapter point to the difficulty in assuming that the idea that more heterogeneous schools use streaming applies across all contexts.

In Ireland, the use of ability-based differentiation (hereafter referred to as 'streaming') in secondary schools has declined over time. Using nationally representative surveys of schools, the proportion of secondary schools using streaming for first year students was 60% in 1980, declining to 44% by 1993, with a further decline to 30% in 2002, the time when the study cohort entered secondary education. Some schools are found to postpone streaming until after first year, though by 2002, only an additional 5% of schools moved from using mixed ability base classes in first year to employing streaming in second year.

In tandem with this overall decline in the use of streaming, rigid ability grouping is now increasingly concentrated in schools serving more socio-economically disadvantaged populations. In 1980, streamed schools did not differ from those with mixed ability base classes in their median social class and boys' secondary schools were more likely to stream than other school types (Hannan et al., 1983). However, analysis of patterns in 2002 reveals significant social differentiation in the use of streaming. Figure 6.1 draws on a logistic regression model of the school factors predicting the use of streaming; the bars depict the model coefficients in the form of odds ratios. Thus, we can explore the influence of school characteristics of the likelihood of employing streaming holding other school characteristics constant. The use of streaming appears to be, at least partially, driven by logistical concerns, being much more common in larger schools. Schools with more than 600 students are almost seven times as likely as very small schools (those with fewer than 200 students) to use streaming. This is not surprising, given that some very small schools will have only one class group per year so it is not feasible to divide this class into

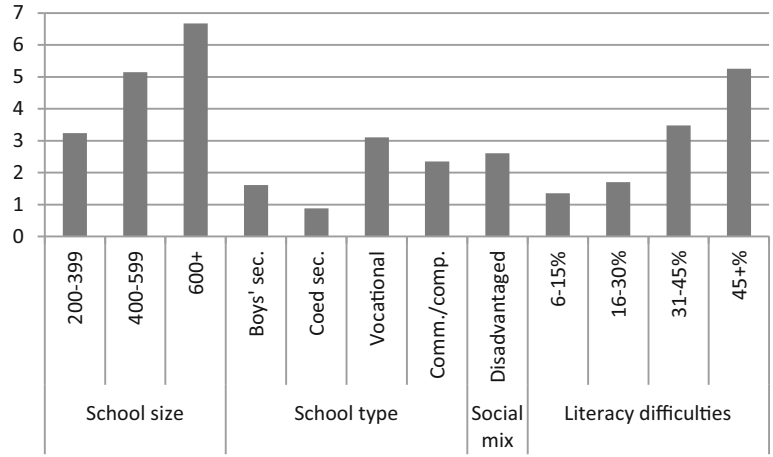

Fig. 6.1 Likelihood of using ability-based differentiation by school characteristics (Note: Odds ratios are derived from a logistic regression model of the influence of school size, school type, school social mix and prevalence of literacy difficulties among the student intake on the likelihood of using ability-based differentiation)

a higher and lower stream. The levels of streaming in single-sex voluntary secondary schools are found to be similar to those in coeducational voluntary secondary schools. Thus, the high levels of streaming found in boys' schools in the 1980s are no longer evident 20 years later. Even taking account of proxies for social and ability mix (whether the school is designated disadvantaged and the principal's perception of the prevalence of literacy difficulties among the student intake), vocational and community/comprehensive schools are significantly more likely to use streaming than voluntary secondary schools. Schools that are designated disadvantaged (i.e. those who receive additional government funding because they have a high concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds) are more than twice as likely to use streaming as other schools. The use of streaming also increases in line with perceived literacy difficulties, being more common in schools where more than 30% of the student intake is deemed to have such difficulties. Some of the initial difference between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools is related to the perceived level of literacy difficulties among the first year intake. The relative difference declines from 3.7 to 2.6 when this is taken into account; however,

this still points to a substantial effect of the concentration of disadvantage on the use of streaming. Thus, the use of streaming is found to reflect the ability mix and the social mix of students attending the school as well as logistical factors relating to school size.

These patterns contrast with those found in earlier international studies. In the Irish situation, streaming does not appear to be driven by the heterogeneity of student ability but rather by the presence of a sizeable group of students who are seen to have difficulties in core skills such as literacy. In addition, the use of streaming has become concentrated over time in schools serving working-class populations. The extent to which this pattern impacts on inequalities in student outcomes is discussed later in the chapter.

Interviews with school personnel in the case-study schools allowed for a more detailed investigation of reasons for using streaming in the school. Six of the schools in this study used ability-based differentiation, four of these being working-class in composition and two having a socially mixed intake. One of the most frequently cited reasons for using streaming related to the practical difficulties of teaching a very mixed group of students in the same class group.

> Teachers would say that it's easier to teach a homogeneous group; that would be in fact the main advantage. (Staff, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class)

> Here we have a number of children on the 2nd percentile, on the 4th percentile and the 6th percentile, the 7th and the 9th percentile, now there is no way that those children could keep up even in the 3 years [with] people that are on a 70+ percentile. There is just no way it could be done. (Staff, Dawes Point, boys, working-class)

One teacher remarked that the difficulties in teaching heterogeneous groups of students had negative effects for more academically able students in particular, resulting in them being 'held back' because of a slower pace of instruction:

> It [mixed ability] can lead to the good ones being held back a bit because there is more disruption, the teacher has to work more slowly … I think it's actually harder to teach, it's harder to teach them. (Staff, Park Street, boys, socially mixed)

It is worth noting that the latter quote reflects not only difficulties in teaching a mixed group but points to potential differences in misbehaviour by ability.

The use of streaming was seen, at least partially, as reflecting the constraints posed by the structure of the curriculum, principally the distinction between higher and ordinary levels in the Junior Certificate exams:

> Whether we like it or not, we are always aiming for an examination situation and in the present Junior Cert there are two levels in most and three levels in some subjects, so it probably makes it easier for a class and for a teacher if more or less the whole class are aiming for a particular level and therefore there is uniformity in what's being taught in the class room. (Staff, Park Street, boys, socially mixed)

However, this teacher does not make clear why exam structures require more rigid forms of ability grouping rather than setting where higher and ordinary level groups would be divided for particular subjects (such as Irish and Maths) rather than for all subjects.

Streaming was thus seen by school staff as facilitating a pace of instruction tailored to the needs of specific students.

> From a teaching point of view, I think it's much easier to teach them when they can all stay together at the same level. I think any sort of course work would just take twice as long because you'd have to stop and go back and maybe have one group working at a faster pace than the others and I just think from that point of view, it's easier [streaming]. (Staff, Park Street, boys, socially mixed)

Some teachers emphasised the advantage of this approach in facilitating additional support for students with academic difficulties, allowing a focus on core literacy skills (see below):

> It's easier to teach and you are able to give them the individual attention and also they have smaller classes. In the more individual context, you are able to work on their skills that they are weak in which makes it easier because you don't have the whole class working on the same type of skills whereas if you are in the top stream, you certainly aren't going to worry about punctuation, capital letters, which is where these students really need the help. So that's helped that way. You're also able to do different teaching methods instead [of] using the books and everything else, you can use materials that are appropriate for their age and you are not singling them out. (Staff, Lang Street, boys, working-class)

Streaming was seen not only as a way of adapting the pace of instruction and materials used but as a way of tailoring the range of subjects to ones more 'suitable' for the student group:

> They won't have to do things like the subject that are just too abstract and just way off for them say like French or maybe business studies or things like that, they'll only do the subjects that are going to make sense to them, which helps too. (Staff, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class)

Staff in schools serving more disadvantaged populations further emphasised the way in which streaming allowed additional (even 'specialist', Dixon Street) teaching resources to be targeted at the lower stream class, which was typically smaller in size than other class groups.

> If we had a mixed ability approach our classes would be bigger and the students who have the greatest need wouldn't get the attention that they get. (Staff, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class)

> Our weaker students are in smaller classes and get the benefit of more individual teaching. I think certain do better than if they were mixed in with the better students. (Staff, Lang Street, boys, working-class)

> That's another good reason why we have streaming right from the very beginning, because we can actually target their specific needs. Of course, it is pretty obvious that if we stream for children who are at the most difficult end or with the greatest needs, then if we are prepared to work with a class of maybe twelve students who have special learning difficulties, then we can effectively put a team in place who will deliver an appropriate curriculum and will bring those children on. (Staff, Lang Street, boys, working-class)

In contrast, other disadvantaged schools emphasised the need to provide opportunities for the 'brighter' students by having one 'good class':

> A huge proportion of our students, both now and in the past, would have been academically slow. And therefore you want those that will make progress to be kind of together. (Staff, Hay Street, coeducational, working-class)

> The advantage I suppose is that the better group can advance without being held back … and the group which has difficulties then is a smaller group, so it gets easier then. From the teacher's point of view to deal with a smaller group of students is better. (Staff, Dawes Point, boys, working-class)

Principals and teachers in streamed schools were not unambivalent about the use of ability-based differentiation. Many acknowledged the potential stigma attached to lower stream classes but felt, on the whole, that this was counterbalanced by the advantages in meeting the different needs of the students involved.

> We can help them better in the streaming environment. Now that is a genuine belief we have. Because in the way we have them streamed we are able to pull aside a very small third stream. Now I know all the old arguments about they only live up to what they are expected to do all those things come into play. But we can marshal our manpower to help in that respect. We find it good. We have a good success with them. (Staff, Dawes Point, boys, working-class)

> Sometimes I wonder about grouping the children that have the least ability together, because they inevitably present with behaviour problems as well. They have a very poor self image, because they know they are the lowest class. And it's almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy. If I am classed as being no good I will act no good. … It has its advantages in that you have them in a group you can gear your lessons to their level. But I don't know if the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. (Staff, Lang Street boys, working-class)

Although the desire to cater to students of differing abilities was seen as a key justification for the use of streaming, an analysis of student achievement levels on entry to secondary school showed no necessary relationship between the dispersion of student ability and the approach taken to ability grouping. Figure 6.2 shows the variability in reading and mathematics test scores among students on entry to secondary education. This variability is measured in terms of the value of the standard deviation. Test scores were available only for ten of the case-study schools, five of which used ability-based differentiation and five of which used mixed ability base classes. It is clear from the patterns depicted in Fig. 6.2 that there is no simple relationship between variability and approach to ability grouping. Some of the schools that use streaming, in particular, Dixon Street, have relatively

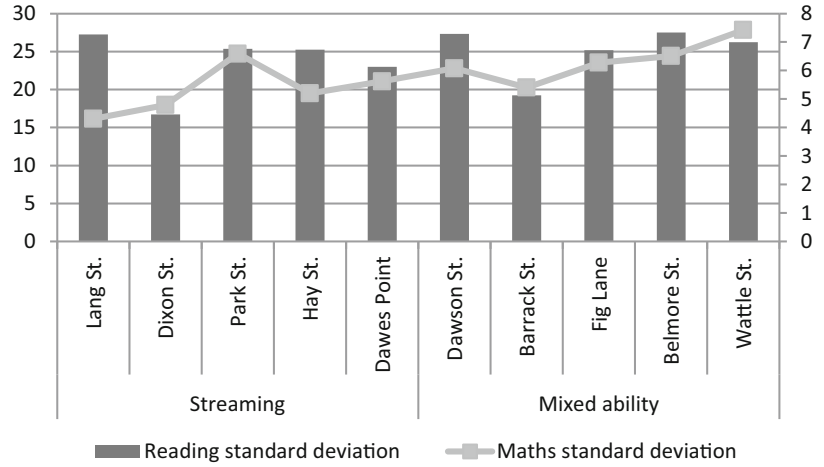

Fig. 6.2 Dispersion of reading and mathematics test scores on entry to secondary education

narrow variation in test scores among incoming students. Among schools using streaming, Lang Street has a heterogeneous intake in terms of reading scores (but not so in mathematics), but this is similar to the variation found in three of the schools which use mixed ability base classes. Thus, the approach to ability grouping appears to reflect levels of disadvantage and, to some extent, lower levels of prior achievement rather than having a very mixed intake of students.

An analysis of the case-study schools also shows that the construction of 'ability' is far from straightforward. The schools used a variety of metrics of ability to allocate students to their base classes, including exams set by the school, nationally standardised aptitude tests and/or reports from the primary school. Thus, it is not clear that student allocation to particular ability groups reflects a consistent definition of 'ability' across schools. The use of streaming is also found to involve a rather fixed notion of ability. After the initial allocation, there was very little mobility between class groups. Almost all (94–95%) of those who started in a higher or middle stream class remained in that group for the whole of their lower secondary education. There was, however, some movement out of lower stream into middle stream classes, with a fifth of students making this transition, a pattern largely driven by a reassessment of students after school exams in Park Street.

The profile of schools using rigid ability-based differentiation streaming means that working-class young people, especially boys, are more likely to attend schools that use streaming. Within these schools, working-class young people are under-represented in higher stream classes; a third of those in higher stream classes in the case-study schools were from professional backgrounds compared with 14% of those in lower stream classes.

Streaming and Student Experiences

In discussing the rationale for streaming, school staff referred to the need to divide students on the basis of the subject levels taken and the desire to match the pace of instruction to student ability. The findings indicate a very strong relationship between the class to which students are allocated and the level at which they take subjects. Lower stream classes were most commonly allocated to ordinary or foundation level while higher stream classes were more likely to be able to access higher level subjects. Thus, students in higher stream classes took an average of 5.9 higher level subjects compared with 4.7 for those in middle stream classes and just 0.2 in lower stream classes. In the interviews with students, the lower stream groups were more likely to report constraints on their choice of subjects and subject levels.

> We are not allowed to pick.
> Because we are slow.
> Yes, we are in a slow class.
> [Somewhat later in the interview]
> When you are in C and D you can't pick. When you are in A or B you are allowed pick.
> Interviewer: Do you think that it is fair that only…?
> It is not. Because then people are saying to you that you are slow and all. (Lower stream class, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 1st years)

The class to which students were allocated at the beginning of first year quickly became a central part of their identity as learners. Students typically took their subjects in the same class grouping; thus, lower stream students were in the lowest group not only for English and Mathematics but for Physical Education, Art, and Materials Technology (Wood), with no accommodation made for potentially different abilities in different

subjects. Young people themselves were highly aware of their place in the school pecking order. The first group interviews with students took place around six weeks into the first term of first year. Even at this stage, students made clear comparisons between class groups, labelling them as 'smart', 'normal' and 'dumb'.

> Interviewer: Can I ask how are you divided into classes? Do you know?
> Student: Who's smart goes into [this class] and who is dumb goes into [that class] or [that class] or something. (Higher stream class, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class school, 1st years)

> They [the higher stream] are clever and we are dumb. (Lower stream class, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 1st years)

> A2 and A1 are smart classes and B1 and B2 are normal classes, then C1 and C2 are stupid classes. (Lower stream class, Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

> They [the lower stream class] think that they are mad.
> They are just all scumbags really. (Middle stream, Lang Street, boys, working-class, 1st years)

What processes resulted in the absorption of these labels by young people in streamed classes? The way in which access to higher level subjects was constrained for middle and lower stream classes undoubtedly served as a strong signal of difference and of how schools viewed student potential. However, day-to-day processes within the classroom played an important role in reinforcing these labels. Such processes centred on the pace of instruction, the workload expected of students and the quality of interaction between teachers and students. One rationale for having streamed classes was the ability to match the pace of instruction and workload to student ability. But how did this work in reality? In each of the three years of lower secondary education (and beyond), students were asked whether their teachers went too quickly or too slowly with their class. Looking at responses at the end of first year, which are broadly consistent with those for later years, we see that streaming does not in fact result in a close match between pace of work and student perceived need. Over half (54%) of those in lower stream classes felt that their teachers went too slowly with their class while 45% of those in higher stream classes felt their teachers went too quickly:

> In every class they always do a chapter of a book and then go onto a different chapter even if you don't understand it.
> Interviewer: OK, so it is too quick?
> Student: Yes. You just get mixed up. (Higher stream class, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 1st years)

Furthermore, streaming did not reduce the heterogeneity of experience within and across classes since a minority (21%) of higher stream groups reported the pace of instruction to be too slow while 28% of lower stream groups reported a pace of instruction that was too fast. Thus, attempting to have a homogeneous class group through streaming did not appear to reduce heterogeneity of experience within the class.

The nature of academic workload and homework changed young people as they moved through lower secondary education (see Chaps. 2 and 7) and the nature of this change varied according to ability group. On entry to first year, different ability groups reported different experiences of curriculum (dis)continuity. Higher stream classes were more likely to report an escalation in standards, finding it difficult to adapt to what was expected of them.

> They [teachers] are much more strict [with the higher stream class]. They think we are brain boxes and we are only kids. We don't know all the scientific stuff. (Higher stream class, Dixon Street, working-class coeducational school)

> Interviewer: At the beginning, did [the Irish teacher] not ask you how much Irish you had?
> No.
> She just expected that we all knew buckets of Irish.
> She thinks we know everything in the Irish language, we know nothing. (Higher stream class, Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

In contrast, lower stream groups are more likely to feel that they are repeating much of the material covered in the final year of primary school.

When asked to compare schoolwork demands with the previous year, second and third year students in lower stream classes were more likely to say that schoolwork was 'about the same' as previously while more of those assigned to higher stream groups found schoolwork more challenging as they moved through lower secondary education. Responses to these challenges, in the form of time spent on homework and study, also varied across ability groups. The gap in time investment between the

lower stream and the top and middle streams grows over time. All of the groups experience a 'dip' in homework time in second year (see Chap. 2) but while top and middle stream classes regain ground on the transition to third year, lower stream groups are actually spending less time on homework midway through their lower secondary exam year than they had on entry to secondary school (Fig. 6.3). This pattern may reflect more homework being assigned to different class groups and/or more time spent on study by these groups. The interviews point to the mutually reinforcing role of teacher expectations and student behaviour, with one class stating:

> We don't do our homework so we don't get it. Teachers know we don't do it so they don't bother checking it.
> We don't get homework.
> We never did get homework.
> We're sort of the thick class. (Lower/middle stream, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 3rd years)

On the basis of the measures of schoolwork and homework engagement over the whole of lower secondary education, a typology of students was constructed. 'Engaged' students found schoolwork progressively harder and/or spent more time on homework as they moved through the system. Those who were 'gearing up for the exam early'

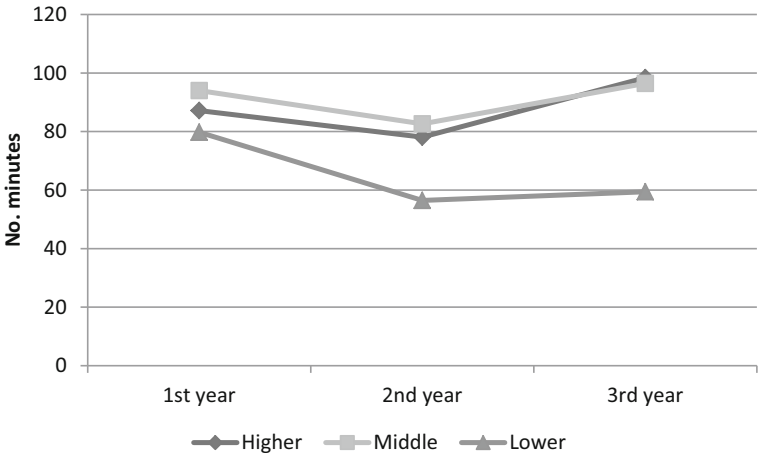

Fig. 6.3 Time spent on homework and study by ability group

found schoolwork more challenging in the transition to second year but remained at a consistent level on entry to third year; this contrasted with the 'gearing up later' group who only accelerated their investment in schoolwork on moving into the exam year. The 'drifters' saw all three years as broadly similar in terms of learning and homework demands whereas those who were 'disengaged' found schoolwork easier or, more commonly, spent less time on homework as they moved through the system. A strong relationship is found between engagement and ability group allocation. The 'engaged' group is most prevalent in mixed ability and higher streams while the majority of those in lower stream classes are found to be drifting or disengaging (Fig. 6.4). This pattern is not merely related to differences in prior ability levels between the class groups. Among the lowest group (fifth) in terms of reading test scores on school entry, the majority (72%) of those in higher stream classes are highly engaged while the majority (82%) of those in lower stream classes are drifting or disengaged. Thus, patterns of engagement reflect contextual factors relating to the demands on students as well as prior differences between students.

The influence of labelling and teacher expectations is also reflected in the quality of teacher–student interaction over the course of lower secondary education. Perhaps surprisingly, the level of positive interaction between teachers and students in lower stream classes is actually higher than that in middle and higher stream groups across all three years. On closer inspection, this appears to reflect the smaller average class sizes, so

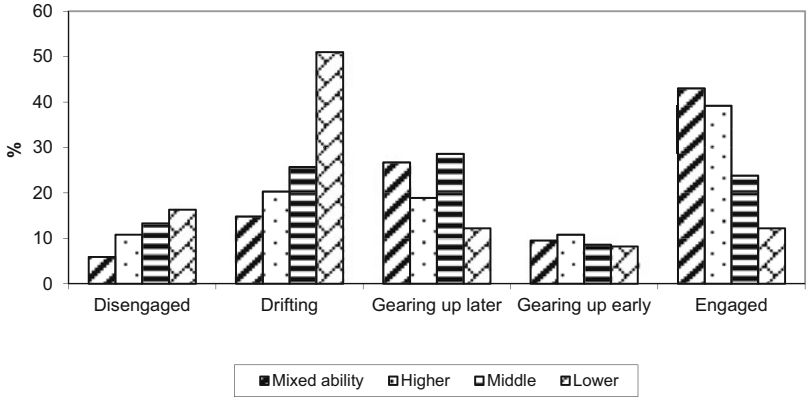

Fig. 6.4 Schoolwork engagement by initial class allocation

that young people have more frequent interactions with teachers—being asked questions, asking questions and being praised. In contrast, the nature of negative interaction changes over time and those in lower stream classes have a distinctive pattern (Fig. 6.5). All class groups report similar average levels of negative interaction with teachers, being reprimanded or scolded, at the beginning of first year. For lower stream classes, this level increases progressively over time, with the gap between ability groups in the quality of interaction with teachers widening over time. The pattern for middle stream groups is broadly similar to that found for lower stream classes but plateaus between second and third year.

The longitudinal nature of the study allows us to unpack these processes further to see whether the patterns reflect teacher expectations and greater use of reprimand and/or higher levels of misbehaviour among lower stream groups. Combining survey data with information from the interviews reveals a complex picture. Somewhat surprisingly, given the patterns depicted in Fig. 6.4, the overall scale of self-reported misbehaviour and sanction does not vary significantly across ability groups. Instead, significant variation was evident in the use of more severe sanctions with lower stream groups. By the mid-point in third year, four-fifths of the lower stream classes had had detention at least once that year while four in ten had been suspended; this compares with half of those in higher

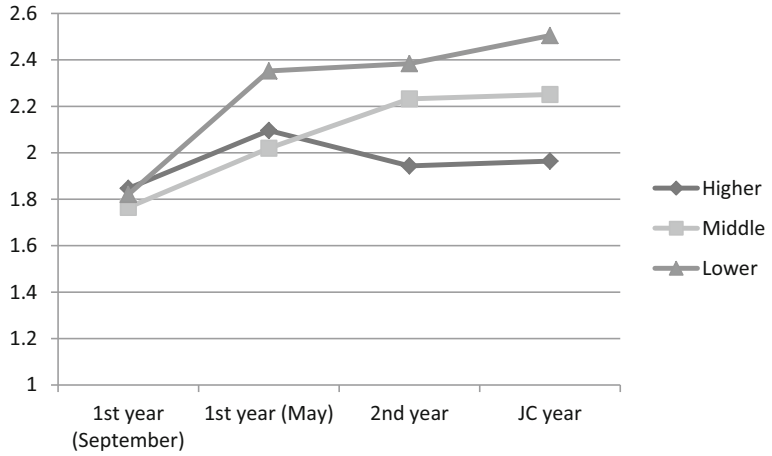

Fig. 6.5 Level of negative teacher–student interaction by ability group

stream classes receiving detention and 16% being suspended. Thus, day-to-day instances of mild misbehaviour do not appear to vary but a cycle of being reprimanded by teachers and 'acting up' in response appears to emerge in lower stream (and, to some extent, middle stream) classes. The growing sense of disengagement and its implications for behaviour were vividly captured in this conversation with a middle stream class:

> School drives you mad, it actually would, the teachers, if you'd better teachers there would be no one getting in trouble.
> When you come back at the start of the year you're alright for a while.
> You calm down but then it starts building up through the year because you're so bored of school and you want to get out of it. (Middle stream, Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

Many young people themselves described the disorderly and disruptive climates in middle and lower stream classes, and the implications for their learning:

> Most people in our class give cheek to the teacher and that means that the teacher has to shout and all.
> There are two boys in my class and last Thursday we got loads of homework because they kept talking and the rest of us were given more homework.
> She said "the more they keep talking, the more homework we will get".

> They know that we want to be good and not get homework, so they just do it so that we will get the homework. They don't do anything and then they get rules but they just don't do the rules. They don't care. (Middle stream, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 2nd years)

> I would like to learn but they all mess in our class. (Middle stream, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 2nd years)

> The teachers are always shouting and things. The class would be ruined and everything. When the teacher is reading a story or something they would be all there talking. (Middle stream, Lang Street, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

This section has explored the extent to which student experiences vary across different ability groups; the final section of the chapter will look at

whether these differential experiences impact on student outcomes such as examination performance and school retention. Before examining these outcomes, it is worth unpacking the extent to which mixed ability base classes result in mixed ability teaching and whether sources of differentiation are apparent in these schools too.

Mixed Ability in Reality?

As indicated in Chap. 1, six of the case-study schools allocated students to mixed ability base classes. In some cases, the use of mixed ability classes was a reaction to negative experiences in the past with streamed classes:

> They [the lower stream class] felt that they were different, they were all in the one class and it was obvious that they were doing a different curriculum from the rest. And I really felt that whatever self-esteem or confidence we could have given them, it took that away from them - by putting them into the special class. (Teacher, Barrack Street, girls, working-class)

In other cases, the purposive use of mixed ability was seen as boosting the academic achievement levels of lower ability students because of the motivating presence of their higher ability peers.

> By having them in mixed ability classes … the weaker ones will hopefully learn a bit from the stronger ones and might even be a little bit motivation because there are students who are doing that little bit better than them. (Teacher, Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class)

> It would help the weak ones to fit in more with the stronger. And it would help relationships better if the very academic ones were mixed with the weaker ones. (Teacher, Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed)

However, the extent to which this meant that students experienced mixed ability teaching was widely variable. Even in these schools, the fact that subjects were examined at different levels was seen as making it difficult to cover these levels in the same class group. However, in contrast to streamed schools, this was resolved by using setting for particular subjects rather than having a blanket allocation to lower or higher stream classes.

> We do streaming [setting] in … Irish and Maths. It just wouldn't be possible from what I understand in discussions with the Maths teachers to sort of have a class of mixed ability and have some of them doing the higher and some of them doing the ordinary … it would be, I suppose, physically impossible to deal with on that basis. … The content of the material that would have to be covered would be different and the teacher would really have to divide himself or herself into three to cope with three different strands within the class. (Teacher, Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class)

> There's no way you could do a higher course in Irish with a lad who can't hardly put two words of Irish together. So you have to be realistic. (Teacher, Wattle Street, boys, socially mixed)

The national survey of principals indicated that 17% of schools who have mixed ability classes use setting for one or more subjects for first year students. The use of setting for one or more subjects increases by Junior Certificate year, taking place in 86% of schools with mixed ability base classes. Setting is more prevalent in Mathematics, Irish and English than in other subjects. This appears to reflect the concern about having three different levels in these subjects (higher, ordinary and foundation) compared to two levels for other subjects. Furthermore, all students take these three subjects, making it logistically easier to divide students into different groups. School policy regarding access to higher level was very variable, with some schools encouraging students to aim for higher level for as long as possible while others strictly rationed higher level places from quite early on in lower secondary education (see also Chap. 3).

The proportion taking higher level subjects reflected the interplay of school policy, teacher expectations and student preferences. Figure 6.6 shows the average number of higher level subjects taken by young people in the ten schools for which reading test scores on entry are available. Because the schools vary markedly in the ability levels of their incoming students (see above), the figure focuses only on those students who fell into the second lowest reading quintile (fifth) in order to compare like with like. Take-up of higher level subjects is found to reflect the social composition of the school as well as the approach to ability grouping. In general, young people in streamed schools take fewer higher level subjects on average, reflecting the constraints on access for middle and lower stream classes already discussed. Schools serving working-class populations typically have a lower take-up of higher level subjects, although there is

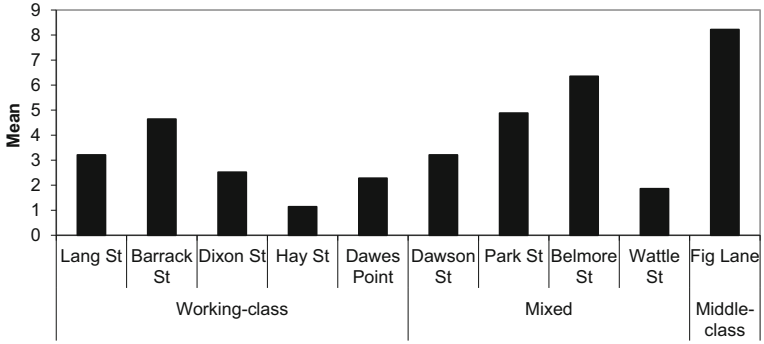

Fig. 6.6 Number of higher level subjects taken by school (second lowest reading quintile on entry to secondary school)

considerable variation, ranging from an average of 1.1 subjects in Hay Street, a highly disadvantaged school using streaming, to 4.6 subjects in Barrack Street, a working-class girls' school which has mixed ability base classes. There is considerable variation too among the socially mixed schools, even where they had mixed ability base classes. In Belmore Street, a girls' school, students were encouraged to take higher level subjects for as long as possible, a situation which contrasts markedly with that in Wattle Street, where only a small number of first year students were allowed to take higher level with their access being determined on the basis of their first year exam results. What is striking is the level of take-up in the middle-class school, Fig Lane. In this school, it is taken for granted that students, even those with relatively low reading test scores on entry, take higher level subjects unless they explicitly opt out.

The importance of the initial decision regarding subject levels was reinforced by the lack of upward mobility taking place afterwards (see Chap. 3). Many students dropped 'downwards' from higher to ordinary, or ordinary to foundation, but movements 'upwards' were very rare.

Student Outcomes

The ceiling set on student achievement by differential access to higher level subjects coupled with a climate of low expectations in middle and lower stream classes had profound consequences for student outcomes. Figure 6.7 shows the difference in Junior Certificate (lower secondary)

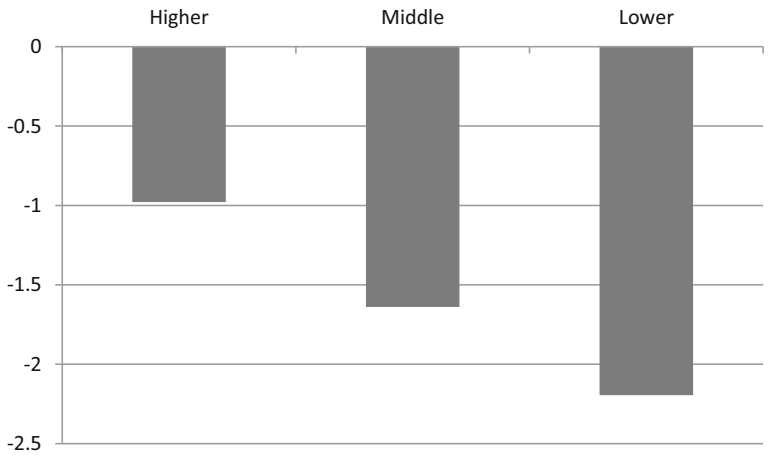

Fig. 6.7 Achievement difference grade point average between streamed and mixed ability classes, controlling for gender, social background and prior ability (Note: The figure illustrates multilevel model coefficients for different kinds of streamed classes relative to mixed ability base classes, controlling for gender, social class background and reading test scores on entry to secondary education)

achievement levels across ability groups, controlling for a range of factors including reading and maths achievement on entry to secondary education. A grade point average, with a minimum value of zero and a maximum value of 10, is calculated on the basis of subject level and grade received; this score is then averaged across all exam subjects taken. There is a very substantial difference in performance between higher and lower stream classes, a difference of over two grade points per subject. It is noteworthy that higher stream classes actually achieve a lower grade point average than those in schools with mixed ability base classes. Earlier research using data collected in the mid-1990s indicates no difference in performance between mixed ability and higher stream classes (Smyth, 1999). The shift appears to reflect the greater concentration of streaming in more socially disadvantaged schools, which tend to have lower achievements levels overall.

Differences are also found in relation to school completion. A majority (60%) of those who were allocated to lower stream classes did not complete upper secondary education compared with a fifth to a quarter in higher and middle stream classes and just 7% in mixed ability classes.

Nationally rigid ability grouping is less common at upper secondary level, largely because students are taking more optional subjects, making it more difficult to group them by ability across all subjects. However, in two of the six schools that used streaming at lower secondary level (Dawes Point and Dixon Street), class groups were retained over the transition to upper secondary levels. The way in which Junior Certificate subject levels channelled students into related levels for the Leaving Certificate, with much 'downward' movement but little move from ordinary to higher level, meant that being in a lower stream class had lasting consequences. Among the minority of lower stream students who remained on in school to completion of upper secondary level, a significant gap in Leaving Certificate achievement was evident. Even taking account of their lower Junior Certificate grades, those who had been in a lower stream class scored 4.7 grade points per subject (out of a maximum of 28) less than those who had been in mixed ability or higher stream classes.

Conclusions

This chapter has shown that a very different classroom climate emerges according to the ability group of the class. The labelling of the class groups, the allocation to ordinary or foundation subject levels and the expectations of teachers and students combine to provide very different learning experiences for lower stream groups. Lower stream classes are characterised by a slow pace of instruction, with students drifting or even disengaging as they move through lower secondary education. Within these groups, a negative dynamic of teacher reprimand and student misbehaviour emerges, culminating in early school leaving and academic underperformance for many students. Stark differences are found in the academic outcomes of young people depending on the ability group of the class to which they are allocated. The majority—six in ten—of those placed in lower stream classes in the case-study schools dropped out of school before the end of upper secondary education. Those who remained in school achieved significantly lower grades in their Junior and Leaving Certificate exams, relative to their reading and maths test scores on entry to secondary school.

Although rigid ability-based differentiation has become less prevalent in Irish secondary schools, it is increasingly confined to schools serving a more socio-economically disadvantaged population. As a result, working-class young people, especially boys, are more likely to attend schools where streaming is used and, within these schools, are more likely to be allocated to lower stream classes. Given the much poorer levels of educational

attainment found in middle and lower stream classes, ability grouping can be seen as playing a key role in the reproduction of socio-economic inequality within Irish schools.

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CHAPTER 7

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Research and policy debate has increasingly emphasised the importance of utilising student voice to inform teaching and learning in the classroom (see Chap. 1). At the same time, the maintenance or introduction of high-stakes testing within certain educational systems has brought renewed attention to the potential impact of different approaches to teaching on student outcomes and experiences. This chapter explores young people's perspectives on what kinds of teaching they find engaging and what helps them learn. It also explores the potential impact of an orientation to exam-based assessment on student experiences, given that Ireland represents an interesting case study of a high-stakes exam system. The analyses also consider the impact of learning outside of school, principally, the time spent on homework and study in the evenings and weekends, and the use of private tuition, especially in the exam years.

What Is Good Teaching?

Chapters 4 and 5 have examined the central role of relationships with teachers in shaping young people's experience of schooling. This section considers the pedagogical approaches adopted by secondary teachers in the case-study schools and student views on whether these approaches facilitate their engagement and learning.

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Comparative research indicates that, relative to many other countries, lower secondary teachers in Ireland utilise more teacher-centred approaches, such as whole-class instruction, the teacher reading from a text book, and so on, rather than more student-centred constructivist approaches (Shiel et al., 2009). The current study involved interviews with key personnel and a survey of all teachers who had first year classes in the case-study schools. As discussed in Chap. 2, there was frequently a mismatch between the kinds of approaches young people had experienced in primary school and those adopted by their secondary teachers:

> The national [primary] school teachers are taught different methods. Now it's coming through and you can actually notice it now in secondary schools, the methods that they would have learned now are totally different than the way I would be teaching them … there's a little bit of a clash there sometimes. (Staff, Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class)

> She just expected that we all knew buckets of Irish.
> She thinks we know everything in the Irish language, we know nothing. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 1st years)

However, a number of other teachers indicated that they adopted a different approach to teaching first years than other year groups and tried to take students' previous experience as a starting point for their lessons:

> I suppose [I teach] in a more simple way, try to tie it in somewhat what they have done in primary school and try to follow it from there. (Staff, Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class)

> I start from the start … anything really that can be the groundwork for next year. (Staff, Park Street, boys, socially mixed)

The survey data indicate that classes tend to be teacher-centred in approach. Just 13% of teachers indicate that they regularly question students or students ask questions in most or every class, with some evidence that asking students questions in class is less frequent among those who have been teaching in the school for a longer period. The extent to which students are given the opportunity (or take the opportunity) to suggest topics to be covered in class is very low, with 60% of teachers saying that this never happened in their first year classes. Four in ten teachers indicated that students regularly copy notes from the board, though this approach

varied across schools and subject areas. Fewer than one in six teachers regularly choose to group students into pairs or larger groups.

The approach actually used in their classes contrasted sharply with young people's own preferences regarding learning approaches. Across groups and over time (with the exception of their final year in school, an issue unpacked below), students consistently favoured more active teaching approaches as compared to the more 'boring' traditional approaches:

> Like involve us more in the subject because they're just sitting there every class and reading their book and all.
> It's so boring. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

> Have a bit of fun in the class, not all boring, learn this learn that.
> They can get the point across and have a bit of fun as well. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

More active engagement in 'fun' activities was seen as facilitating their learning:

> It'd be better if we could have more kind of activities in class because like it can be real boring.
> And you'd learn a lot more as well. We did something in French and we did a whole activity on like learning these French verbs or something and everyone knows them now even though we learnt them in class like and everyone learnt them and we didn't even try to, it was just a game really. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

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

Even in subjects with a practical component like Science, students often reported that the teacher demonstrated experiments rather than allowing them to do them themselves:

> She shows you the experiment, I think we should do it there ourselves. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 2nd years)

The teacher reports indicated that young people had little say in what was covered in the class but students themselves wanted to have some degree of input into lesson content:

> We should have our own decision, they shouldn't make us do work that we don't even want to do. I think we should have a choice, you know what I mean, we have no choices in school. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 2nd years)

A fundamental aspect of what constituted good teaching from the student perspective was clear explanation.

> They [teachers] put it in their own words so that you can understand it. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> If they explain well, and if you ask them again that they do not mind explaining it again.
> They do not go too fast or too slow. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> If they explain things well enough for the student to understand.
> If they have a second way of explaining it maybe; if you didn't get it the first way, they can tell you the second way.
> (Hay Street, coeducational school, working-class, 6th years)

While this may seem self-evident, many young people contrasted their desire for clear explanation with the emphasis on 'covering the course' among some teachers to the detriment of their understanding of the material:

> It's just like if you have questions she'll explain it really well and if you still don't understand like she'll still keep explaining it and not be like oh you should know this by now, like it's really like until you understand where you're coming from, that's kind of really good. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

The personal qualities of the teacher were seen as crucial to good teaching. Enthusiasm and a good grasp of the subject area were seen as key characteristics of good teachers:

Interviewer: So what makes a good teacher like?
Someone who like enjoys the job and is interested in it. And like makes you do the work. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 3rd years)

You know when you know that a teacher just, you know that they don't want to be there and they're just sitting there, you can actually tell when they're like ah I just want to get out of this class right now so if they were a bit more enthusiastic in the class. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 3rd years)

Students emphasised the need for teachers to be approachable so that they could ask for and receive additional support if they needed it.

I would like a teacher if you could actually go up to them and say you are, I'm having problems and not in front of the whole class and maybe they'd help you but not in front of the whole class like. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

[A good teacher is] One that actually cares about the students, whether or not they do well in their exams as opposed to just going in for the forty minutes, teaching and then leaving.
Yeah, they have to have patience as well. (Fig Lane, coeducational school, middle-class, 6th years)

Being relaxed and using humour in class were also favoured by students over teachers who were overly strict:

I think a teacher that's kind of goes down to our level you know and understands us like. Like I mean my English teacher now she'd always kind of have a laugh with us but she knows, she'd make us do our work still you know, and I find I get on much better with teachers like that then I do my work well. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

Because if a teacher is strict you might be afraid to ask them questions but if you can have a bit of craic with them then you wouldn't. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

Some teachers then have a mess with you and they'd be a good class.
…
When we can have some fun.
But we do work at the same time, they just make it more interesting.

> You mess for about five minutes and then you do loads of work. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

> You can have a laugh with them when they talk to you and all during class and they don't give you too much work. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 2nd years)

As emerged strongly in Chaps. 4 and 5, respect for students on the part of teachers was seen as a key aspect of an effective and rewarding learning experience:

> A good teacher will respect their students you know and help them with anything they have difficulties and really be a good teacher in the subject. A bad teacher like they wouldn't be very nice and they'd be unfair to the students. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> Teachers should you know, like really trust you and not shout at you.
> And not roar at you. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 2nd years)

Young people characterised 'bad teaching' as being very teacher-centred, with a lot of teacher talk and reading from the textbook:

> All she does is read from the book and we're doing nothing, you take notes and read from the book.
> …
> Like [X] just sits there and talks, like she just reads from the book and then she gives us extra notes to take down and that's all we do and it's so boring.
> …
> I fall asleep.
> And I don't really remember it as well.
> Yeah, you don't remember it. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

> It's all to do with them [teachers] and it's harder to listen when it's just them talking. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 2nd years)

> If the class is boring you just cannot concentrate, even how much you want to take it in and everything, I think if it's boring it just won't stay in your head, you just want the class to end, like in [the subject] half the class are just like what time is it, let's just get out of here because it's so boring. (Harris Street, girls' school, 3rd years)

Such 'boredom' with the approach taken in class led to disengagement from school for some students:

> When you come back at the start of the year you're alright for a while.
> …
> You calm down but then it starts building up through the year because you're so bored of school and you want to get out of it. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

Poor pace of instruction was also viewed as a characteristic of bad teaching, with some teachers progressing through material without ensuring that students understood it:

> In every class they always do a chapter of a book and then go onto a different chapter even if you don't understand it.
> …
> You just get mixed up. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 1st years)

> And they move ahead whether you understand it or not like another chapter. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

> [A bad teacher is] One that goes too fast.
> And also if they just read from the book and they do not explain. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> And I think it's bad as well a teacher like kind of teaching method is really bad, you just read from the book, just doesn't explain anything, keeps going page by page and everyone's just sitting there like what are we doing, and like just keep going, it's way too fast.
> And if you ask a question on something they get angry because like if you didn't know it, you'd be like what's this, he'd be like well I don't have time for this now.
> They just need to get the course done.
> I don't see the point if you're not learning anything, not like taking it in, that the course is one like you still don't know what was going on so that's really bad.
> Yeah, and teachers that get angry if you ask a question like and you've asked it before. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

> If everyone understands in the classroom then you can continue but then there's a few girls in the class that wouldn't understand so you are stuck, but she keeps going and then you get frustrated and all the other girls are moaning that they don't understand but the teacher rushes along…So it's easier to take it slow. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class, LC)

The last quote raises an important theme in student accounts, namely, that asking the teacher a question or answering a teacher's question incorrectly could in itself fuel negative interaction between teacher and student and even disciplinary sanctions.

> [A bad teacher is one that] If you ask them a question they'll make you out to look stupid in front of the rest of the class. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> You'd be listening in the class and say you don't know something, he'd just say to you that's because you weren't listening but you were listening. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 2nd years)

> If you don't know anything he gives you lines and puts you aside and gets you suspended for a week
> Then you get into trouble off the principal. (Dawes Point, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

Chapter 5 has shown that a negative dynamic can result from teacher reprimand and student misbehaviour but it is interesting to note that in some cases such a dynamic was triggered by the pedagogical conversations taking place in the classroom. This pattern indicates the necessity to take a broad view of school climate, one that incorporates not only misbehaviour and disciplinary sanctions but the nature of interaction in the form of verbal exchanges between teacher and student in the classroom.

Teaching and Learning in the Exam Years

While teacher-centred classes were a common experience across all school years, students in exam years, third and especially sixth year, reported a greater mismatch between the active learning that they favoured and what they experienced in their classes. As the exam approached, there was less use of interactive methods than previously with a much greater focus on covering the course in preparation for the exam. Thus, students in

third year reported that the use of group work and project work was less prevalent in the lead-up to their first national examination, with a greater emphasis on the need to 'study':

> Interviewer: What kinds of things would you like to be doing in a class?
> Group work probably.
> And projects.
> Interviewer: Do you have group work going on in your classes at the moment?
> Not really.
> Not this year, we used to have a few last year.
> …
> We used to do some table quiz things.
> Quizzes could be good.
> Interviewer: And you don't do those?
> No, not any more (Belmore Street, girls' schools, 3rd years)

> Interviewer: Does that [group work] happen much?
> Sometimes.
> No.
> Not this year, they did last year but now they are like no you have to study, you have to work this year, it's not a fun year. (Harris Street, girls' school, 3rd years)

In addition to a shift in the teaching methods used, young people also reported less tolerance on the part of teachers of talking in class, a pattern that can be seen as, at least in part, explaining the dip in student engagement discussed in Chap. 5:

> You used to do fun things in class, they'd come in and say let's play games. If you say it this year you get like stared at, what do you think you are?
> …
> They definitely tell you, if you're talking or something, they tell you stop talking you're a third year, you should know better.
> …
> It relates to everything, the exams, you're doing your Junior Cert you shouldn't be talking, you'll miss out on stuff (Harris Street, girls' school, 3rd years)

While doing well in the Junior Certificate exam was seen as important by the majority of students (see below), young people reported increasingly

demanding schoolwork as they moved into upper secondary education (see Chap. 2). This shift was copper-fastened by the strong emphasis within sixth-year classes on preparing for the Leaving Certificate examination. Figure 7.1 shows student reports on the teaching methods used in their sixth-year classes. It is evident that these classes are heavily teacher-dominated and exam-oriented: the teacher does most of the talking, there is a strong emphasis on homework (see below), and practising previous exam papers is a feature of most classes. In contrast, the more active methods favoured by students in previous school years are a rare occurrence; thus, there is little use of group work, project work outside class time, or presentations from the students themselves. While this pattern was evident across all of the case-study schools, it appears that teachers adapt their methods somewhat to the profile of the student body, using more active teaching methods with boys and with students in working-class schools. In contrast, girls' schools and mixed/middle-class schools are characterised by a stronger emphasis on homework setting.

The approach to teaching and learning was very different in the LCA programme. This small group of students in a non-college-bound track reported much more learner-centred pedagogies than their peers taking the other types of Leaving Certificate programme. LCA students were

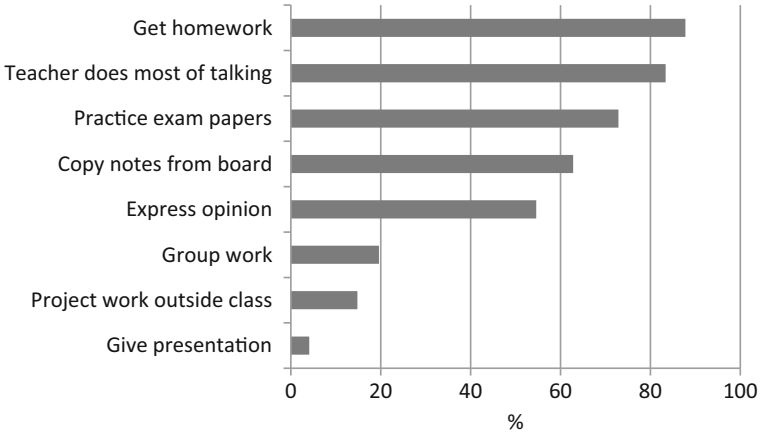

Fig. 7.1 Use of different teaching methods in 'every/most lessons' among Leaving Certificate students

more likely to report the frequent use of group work and project work and that they themselves were allowed to express their opinions.

As in previous years, when students were asked about the ways in which they learned most effectively, many spoke about their preference for more active teaching methods and greater discussion and interaction in class. Students were positive about teachers who made subjects more 'relevant', in ways that they could 'relate to':

> In Geography she always lets us talk.
> Interviewer: Does it make it more interesting?
> Yeah, because they try and draw it out of you instead of her telling you what to do, they try and make you think about it yourself. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

> Some subjects like Business, if you relate it to like what's happening at the time … then it's more interesting because it's more relevant. And then in kind of science subjects, in Chemistry or that, when you do the experiments kind of, they're more, better because you understand them more, it's a little bit different than just sitting learning it. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

At the same time, student awareness of the high-stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate exam meant that they shifted focus towards a more instrumentalist view of exam preparation, a pattern that was especially evident for middle-class young people who were aspiring to take more prestigious fields of study in HE (see Smyth and Banks, 2012b). Thus, for many, teaching to the test became the signal of a good lesson and using previous exam papers to prepare answers was considered especially helpful in preparing for the impending exams:

> Doing questions, working, like if you're doing the questions out of the paper, that's the best way I'd say of getting stuff revised. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

> Doing more like exam questions and got us ready for the wording of the exam, the questions in the exam.
> Like exam technique and stuff like that. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

This group of students preferred test-based assessments as they encouraged or 'forced' them to study and keep motivated:

> Like she give us revision tests once a month and stuff and stuff like that kind of forces you to study, doesn't just leave it up to you. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

In the two middle-class case-study schools, young people even expressed a preference for more frequent testing than they currently experienced:

> I've asked teachers before to give like tests on stuff we've done and they've refused and it's like 'why would you not?'. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

> And they need to give more frequent tests I'd say to kind of keep people on their toes.
> …
> Yeah, if you have a test you'll study but if you don't, it's harder to get down and do it. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

The corollary of valuing the use of tests and practising exam papers was the increasing intolerance among some students of teachers going 'off topic'.

> Like some teachers kind of go off the point sometimes and just waffle on about pointless things that isn't on the course and stuff. (Fig Lane, coeducational school, middle-class, 6th years)

> Like my Home Ec[onomics] teacher, she comes in and she knows how to cook, she tells us all about how to make mayonnaise today, that's not on our course, we don't care … it's like too much stuff to do. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class, 6th years)

It is interesting to note that these student accounts emphasise the fact that teachers were covering material which 'was not on the course'. In fact, young people often conflated what was unlikely to 'come up in the exam' with what was not on the course, focusing their study efforts on the topics 'predicted' to appear in the exam. The growing instrumentalism of some young people was also reflected in the increased take-up of private tuition or shadow education in the final year of school, a topic which is discussed in greater detail below.

What Young People Learn

The chapter so far has focused on young people's attitudes to what helps them learn in general. However, students potentially experienced different approaches to teaching in different subjects as well as different content and course material. Chapter 3 has discussed how young people decide which subjects to choose at lower and upper secondary levels and the extent to which this choice is framed by school factors. As a result, those in the study cohort took different (optional) subjects throughout their school career. There was some commonality, however, in young people's exposure to certain kinds of knowledge, with all students required to take English, Maths and Irish (though exemptions to taking Irish were granted where students had completed their primary education outside the State or where they had a learning disability). This section explores student attitudes to these three subjects and the extent to which these attitudes changed over time.

Figure 7.2 shows levels of interest in the three core subjects over young people's schooling career. Around half of the study cohort find English and Maths interesting, with slightly higher levels of interest found in English than Maths at several time points. In contrast, levels of interest in Irish are significantly lower, averaging around a third and dipping slightly over the transition to upper secondary education.

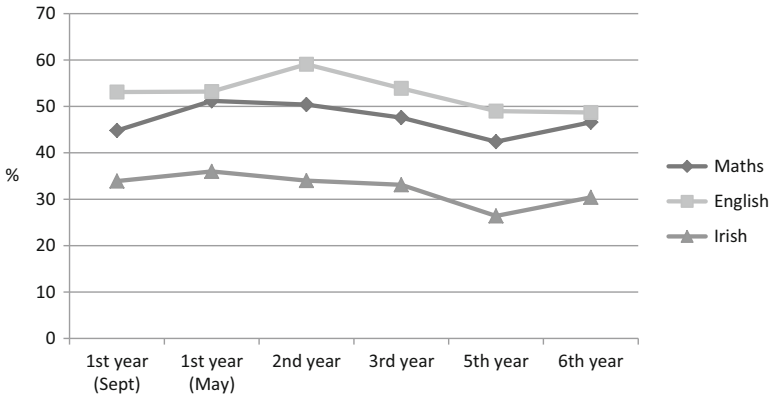

Fig. 7.2 Proportion of young people who find English, Maths and Irish interesting by school year

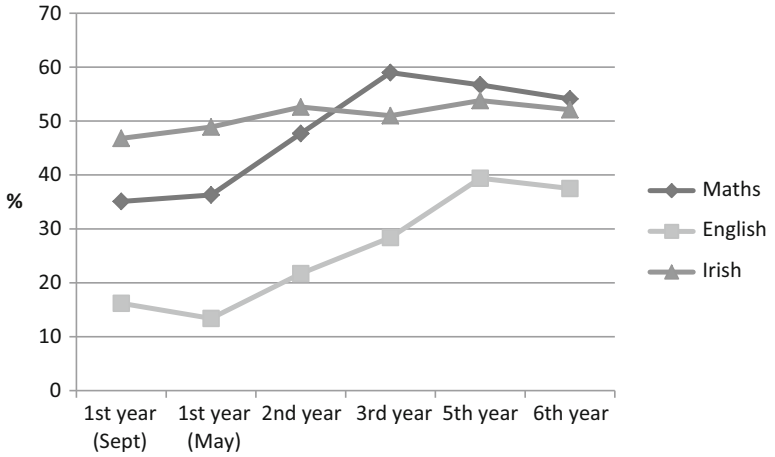

Fig. 7.3 Proportion of young people who find English, Maths and Irish difficult by school year

The pattern is quite different when we turn to perceived subject difficulty. At the beginning of lower secondary education, just under half of the cohort find Irish difficult with a third finding Maths difficult; the perceived difficulty of English is much lower at around one in six students (Fig. 7.3). The perceived difficulty of Irish remains relatively stable over the schooling career. In contrast, the perceived difficulty of Maths and English increases markedly between the end of first year and third year. The perceived difficulty of English continues to increase over the transition to upper secondary education, reflecting student comments on a greater emphasis on more complex material and the need to supply longer essay-type answers (see Chap. 2).

Throughout the school career, finding the core subjects interesting is significantly related to having more positive attitudes to school. However, the relationship between perceived difficulty and school engagement is more complex as higher level subjects taken by more engaged and ambitious students may be more difficult.

Homework and Study

Homework is a common feature of young people's educational experiences across very different schooling systems. However, there is a relative lack of systematic research on the effects of homework on student

achievement and other outcomes (Cooper et al., 2006). The existing research shows a positive but non-linear relationship between the amount of time spent on homework and exam grades (Cooper et al., 2006). Chapter 2 has outlined whether young people felt they spent more time on homework as they moved through secondary school. This section explores the actual amount of time spent on homework and study, the factors affecting this pattern, and the consequences of homework for student achievement.

In keeping with international research (see e.g. Gershenson and Holt, 2015), girls in Irish secondary schools tend to spend more time on homework and study than their male counterparts. Figure 7.4 shows those spending a significant amount of time, three or more hours on a weekday night, by gender and across school years. Levels of high homework intensity are broadly similar among girls and boys during the early phases of lower secondary education but the gender gap in favour of girls widens as the Junior Certificate exam approaches. Both boys and girls report an increase in the amount of time spent on homework and study between second and third year, followed by a decline over the transition to upper

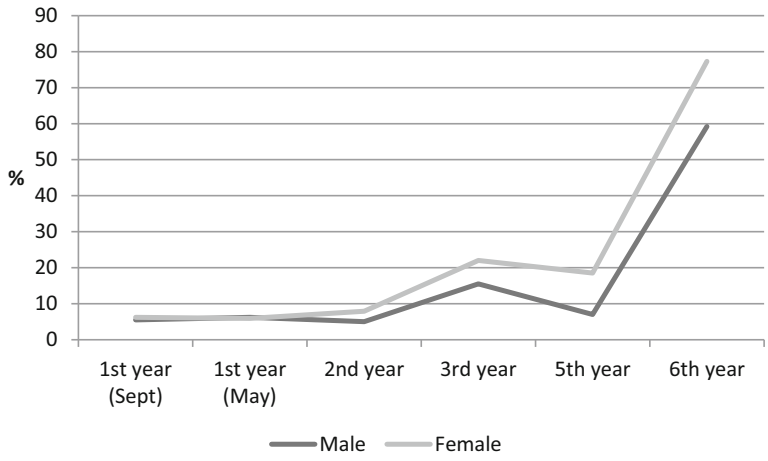

Fig. 7.4 Proportion of students spending three or more hours a night on homework/study by gender

secondary education, and a very sharp increase when they move into their final school year. By this stage, the majority of students are spending at least three or more hours per night on homework/study, with four-fifths of girls reporting this level of intensity.

Social class differences in the investment of time in homework and study become evident from third year onwards, with young people from higher professional backgrounds spending more time on homework/study than those from working-class backgrounds. However, differences in homework time are even greater when the social mix of the school is considered. Figure 7.5 shows only modest differences by school social composition in first and second year. However, in Junior Certificate exam year, the gap between working-class and other (socially mixed or middle-class schools) widens markedly. Students across all types of schools increase the amount of time they spend on homework/study as they approach the Junior Certificate exam, but this increase is much smaller among those in working-class schools compared with much sharper increases in socially mixed and middle-class schools. This difference by school social mix persists into upper secondary education.

Most of the students interviewed saw some purpose in homework, viewing it as 'helping you learn' and 'to remember what you did in class':

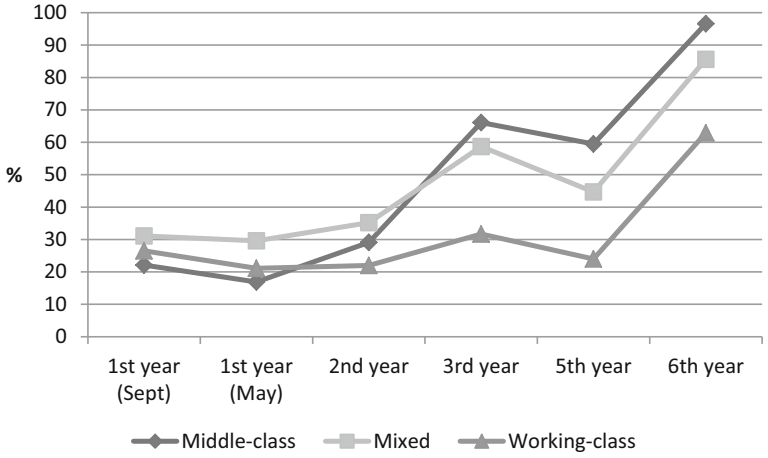

Fig. 7.5 Proportion of students spending two or more hours on homework/study a night by school social mix

> More or less they give you homework just in case you're in school and you learn it all and then you go home and you just forget everything you've learned like if you've something to do in your homework that like to cling onto like to think about what we've done during class and stuff like that. I'd say that's why they give you homework. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

> It sticks in your head more if you go over it though, I do find that. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

Some students reported homework as more useful in reinforcing knowledge and skills in some domains, such as Maths, more than others:

> That's the only way you can learn Maths.
> Yeah you can't just learn Maths by reading it, you have to do it out.
> You have to do a load of questions. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 2nd years)

However, other students saw homework as 'punishment' and a constraint on their free time. This perspective was more frequent in, but by no means confined to, schools serving a more disadvantaged population.

> We do enough in school, just wrecks your evening so it does. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> Some teachers just don't like our class so they give us a load of homework because they know they will waste our time. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 2nd years)

> What's the point in doing homework when you're at home? You could be out. (Dixon Street, coeducational, working-class, 2nd year)

> Maybe if a lot of teachers had understanding that children have so much to do and they need to be able to take it in and too much homework ruins their life, really. We can't wait for the mid-term break but we are still going to get a load of homework for it. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 1st years)

> Too much homework and you are at school for six hours and then you come home, and you are tired and you cannot be bothered doing it. And then you do it anyway and you get it wrong, and then you are tired and you want to lie down and relax. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 2nd years)

Indeed, the fairly frequent use of extra homework as a disciplinary sanction at lower secondary level (see Chap. 4) may have reinforced this view of homework as an imposition rather than as something intended to support student learning.

Some students reported that given the amount of homework they received from teachers of different subjects, they just wanted to get the homework over and done with and it therefore did not contribute to their learning:

> When you're doing homework like you just kind of do it, you wouldn't really learn over it like you just do it out quickly and then throw it to the side.
> …
> You just try and get it over and done with. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 2nd years)

> Sometimes you are just opening the book and writing down whatever is in the book and it does not go in, it is just homework and we have to have it done by tomorrow. But it does not sink in. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 2nd years)

As discussed in Chap. 2, young people frequently made a distinction between 'homework' and 'study', viewing homework as driven by teacher requirements and study as oriented towards preparing for tests and exams:

> I only study if there's a test. That's all I do really like. I do my homework and then if I don't have a test I don't study. (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 2nd years)

> If you've a test the next day, like you're going to obviously do more study than actually work on homework or whatever. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 2nd years)

Figures 7.4 and 7.5 have shown the high levels of time investment in homework and study among young people in their final year of school. Almost three-quarters (73%) of students indicated that they found it 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to balance homework and study in sixth year, with girls and students attending middle-class schools reporting greater such

difficulties. These students complained that midway through the school year teachers were still allocating homework, leaving them little time to 'study' in preparation for the Leaving Certificate exam:

> Teachers would give you like a pile of homework and then expect you to go away and study a chapter as well. What do they think like? (Argyle Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

> They're all piling on the homework now and then we have to do study as well for the mocks, like they're telling us to go over chapters as well as home work, like for maths we get so much homework. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

Trying to balance homework and study was seen as stressful, causing difficulties in combining both activities within a reasonable timeframe:

> That's madness, you're coming home from school to get your dinner then you're gonna do the home work, there's not time to yourself at all, you're wrecked like you want to go to bed then.
> Yeah, the whole evening is gone. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

A further difficulty was that while homework could be beneficial in revising the topics currently being covered in class, students were also required to be familiar with material covered over the previous year and a half in order to be adequately prepared for the exam:

> You don't really have a chance like, you go and you're doing your subjects but especially coming up to exams you don't get the chance to go over the things that you've done like a few months ago or maybe last year because they give you so much work coming up to exams. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

> I understand why they give us so much [homework] because they think it will make us, it will stand to us at the end, but we need time to actually sit down and learn things like.
> Yeah because with the homework we are only learning what we are doing now whereas the stuff we did last year we are not getting a chance to go over it. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

The study findings provide insights into whether the high level of time investment in homework and study paid off in terms of academic achievement among students. In analysing the influence of time on homework/study, it is important to accurately compare like with like since students who invest more time are also likely to be from a middle-class background, have higher levels of prior achievement and be more ambitious, all factors which will also influence academic performance. Taking account of a wide range of other individual and school factors, the amount of time spent on homework and study in third year is significantly related to exam grades in the Junior Certificate exam. This is not a linear effect, however, as only those who spend two or more hours per night achieve higher grades, all else being equal. Similar analyses were conducted to look at the influence of homework/study time at Leaving Certificate level. All else being equal, the time investment is significantly related to exam grades. But the nature of this relationship is somewhat different than at Junior Certificate level: those who spend two to three hours do significantly better academically than those who spend less time, while those spending three to four hours have higher grades yet again. Interestingly, however, especially given the long hours spent by some students, particularly girls, spending more than four hours a night does not yield any further improvement in academic performance levels. Analyses also reveal that taking more subjects at higher level is an important driver of the amount of time spent on homework and study.

Private Tuition

An emerging body of literature (see e.g. Bray, 2009) indicates cross-national variation in the proportion of young people who take private tuition outside school hours. The prevalence of participation in such 'shadow education' has been found to be closely related to the prominence of high-stakes examinations within certain national systems. While research initially focused on Asian countries, a number of European countries, including Ireland, have been found to have high levels of participation in these forms of tuition. In the Irish context, the evocative term, 'grinds', is used to describe private tuition which takes place in private 'grind schools', usually in urban areas, as well as individual tuition undertaken by teachers or HE students. Previous studies of 'grinds' in Ireland had been based on cross-sectional evidence about levels of participation in the Leaving Certificate exam year (Smyth, 2009). The current study

findings allow for a more longitudinal perspective on the take-up of these forms of tuition as well as of student perceptions of the value of grinds.

Figure 7.6 shows the take-up of private tuition over the school career. While young people took private tuition in a range of subjects, the most common subject was Maths. Participation rates are very low in first year—around one in twenty of the cohort—before increasing slightly in second year and more dramatically in third year with the approach of the Junior Certificate exam. Halfway through third year, over a quarter of students were taking such grinds. Take-up rates fall markedly over the transition to upper secondary education but increase to reach their highest levels in the Leaving Certificate exam year. By January of this exam year, just under half (45%) of the cohort were taking such grinds. Among those not taking grinds at the time of the survey, one in six reported they 'definitely' would take grinds before the exam with a further third stating they 'probably' would do so. Private tuition therefore emerges as an important feature of the Irish secondary system and the timing of take-up is strongly determined by preparation for national examinations.

Some important differences are found between different groups of students in their take-up of private tuition. Given that such tuition may involve significant sums of money (Lynch and Moran, 2006), it is not surprising to find a social gradient in take-up (see also Smyth, 2009 on take-up among Leaving Certificate students). However, it is interesting

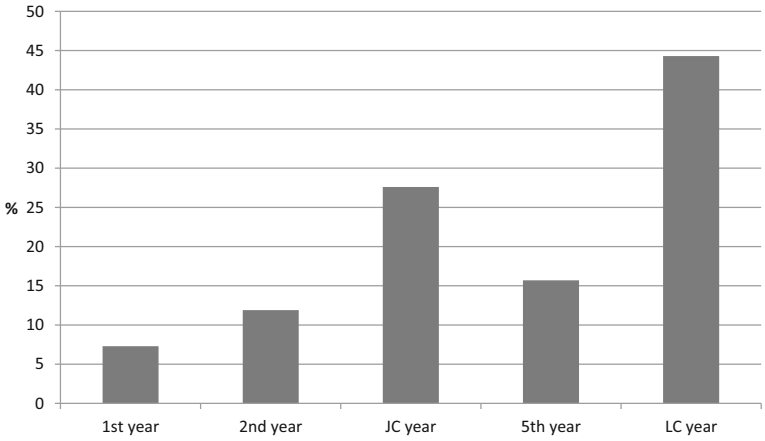

Fig. 7.6 Take-up of private tuition ('grinds') over the school career

to note that the nature of this social gap changes markedly over time. At the beginning of secondary education, rates for young people are similar across social classes but this difference widens over the course of lower secondary education; by third year, therefore, four in ten middle-class students are taking grinds compared within one in six of their peers from working-class backgrounds. This gap in take-up widens further as the Leaving Certificate exam approaches, with middle-class students twice as likely to take grinds in their final year of school as their working-class counterparts. For middle-class students, such participation becomes the norm, with six in ten of them taking private tuition. Throughout this book, we have explored not only the way in which individual social class background shapes student experiences but also the role of the social composition of the school in shaping outcomes. Looking at school social mix, an even more dramatic social gradient in participation in private tuition is found. Figure 7.7 shows that by the Junior Certificate year, there are marked differences in take-up of grinds by school social mix. There is only a slight increase in the likelihood of taking grinds in working-class schools as the exam approaches but students in socially mixed and, especially, middle-class schools increase their take-up dramatically in the run-up to the exam. Between-school differences in participation in the final year of school are even greater, with those in middle-class schools almost three times more likely to take grinds than those in working-class schools. This pattern echoes Matsuoka's (2015) findings of greater take-up of shadow education in high socio-economic status schools in Japan. A further interesting feature is the emergence of gender differences in private tuition take-up, especially in the Leaving Certificate year, with girls more likely than boys of similar characteristics to take grinds.

Contrary to the often posited idea that private tuition is taken because young people are struggling with their schoolwork, the young people taking grinds in the Irish context are those with higher levels of prior achievement and greater ambitions for the future. The gender difference in participation mirrors the greater investment of time in homework and study found among girls in the cohort (see above). Thus, private tuition appears to be a complement to rather than a substitute for studying. The fact that participation is more strongly influenced by school composition than by individual social background suggests the importance of the institutional habitus of the school in shaping participation, with a 'hothouse' climate of exam preparation emerging in certain schools.

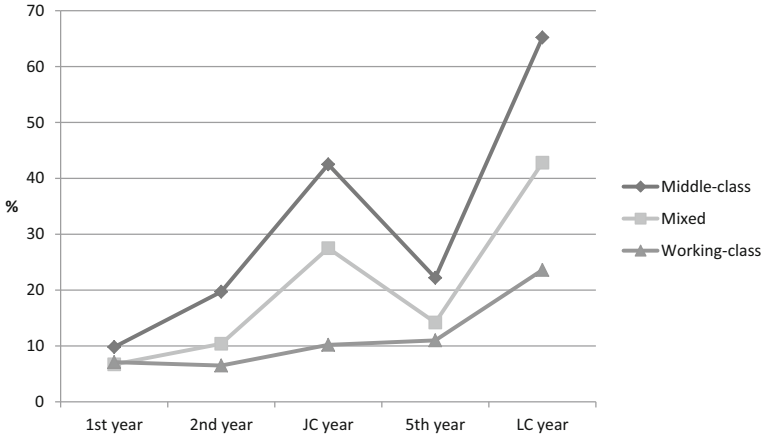

Fig. 7.7 Take-up of private tuition by school social mix

The survey data yield important insights into the factors shaping participation in shadow education. However, the accounts of young people from the group interviews provide further information on why they chose to engage in grinds. One significant theme emerging from these interviews was the perceived need to take private tuition because of poor or unclear teaching.

> It depends on the teacher like if you need grinds or not.
> Yeah, I'd to get grinds because of one teacher, I was so angry that I had to but. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

> I love her but she just can't teach French and she can't control the class so it's just, I need to go to it or else I won't actually know any French. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

While students attending private grind schools were usually in very large classes ('there's ninety people', Belmore Street), other students took private lessons outside school, with this one-to-one approach seen as beneficial:

> It's one on one as well like; if you don't understand you can ask. (Hay Street, coeducational school, working-class, 6th years)

> I prefer the whole one on one thing rather than the whole class on teacher thing. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

For some students, their desire for one-to-one tuition was an explicit response to a fast pace of instruction within classes and the focus of teachers on covering the course rather than facilitating deep understanding:

> You're not given the one on one here, there's 30 others in the class and you're sitting there going I don't know, that's why you need grinds.
> ..
> It's just that there's not enough time to get through the whole course and you're not shown how to do just one particular question. Like there in Maths there's so much to get done but yet you're not shown how to do it, you're just given the work and you just take it down and that's it. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed (6th years))

However, by far the more dominant motivation for taking grinds was the feeling that they were a more efficient way of preparing for the Leaving Certificate examination.

> Those grinds are like an hour and a half, you'd learn more than you'd have learnt in school in three weeks from your teacher. (Barrack Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

> I don't know I just find that like I go to Leeson Street and I learn off my notes for Leeson Street way before I learn off my notes from class. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

As in reflecting on teaching and learning, sixth-year students adopted an increasingly instrumentalist view, stressing the value of focusing on what would appear on the exam paper, an approach which was reinforced by the grinds culture:

> Like in Maths they go straight to the thing that you have to do for the Leaving Cert rather than going through all the stuff that you don't have to do, that you don't really need to know. (Park Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

> I know they're really good and they're just, they're so exam based and I don't know, you just know that you're learning the right stuff, so I find them real helpful. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

> She'd go through the exam papers more because she'd go through every question in the exam papers so no matter, if you cover all them you know the way it's going to come up. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

Some of the student accounts, especially among girls, suggest that a 'hothouse' atmosphere driven by exam-related stress fuelled the perceived need to take grinds:

> Every single one of my friends is doing grinds.
> Interviewer: Why do you think?
> Because they're not getting what they need in their class like.
> And they're panicking because they're afraid they'll do badly or the teacher is just bad. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

The issue of exam-related stress is explored in the following section.

Whether private tuition 'pays off' for students in terms of enhanced exam performance has been the subject of much debate internationally. The findings of previous studies have been inconsistent concerning the impact of private tuition in different national contexts. Studies have also differed in the extent to which they take account of prior differences between participants and non-participants. Tansel and Bircan (2005) find that those who received private tutoring perform better in the Turkish university entrance exam, controlling for family background; however, their study does not control for potential differences between the two groups of students in their levels of prior ability or academic performance. A number of studies in other national contexts have been able to control for differences in prior academic attainment but have varied in their estimates of the net impact of private tuition. In the Japanese context, Stevenson and Baker (1992) indicate gains from participation in some forms of shadow education (such as correspondence courses and practice exams) but none from having a private tutor or taking an after-school class. Kang (2006) indicates a significant but very modest (1.4%) boost in grades among South Korean students, controlling for teacher-assessed initial ability. Research in England has indicated some positive impact of private tuition on attainment but the effect varied across subjects and between girls and boys (Ireson and Rushforth, 2005).

In contrast to the current study, previous research has rarely taken account of other important differences between participants and non-

participants in their attitudes to school and engagement with learning. If, for example, private tuition is a complement to time investment in homework and study, it is crucial to take account of this behaviour in order to ensure we are comparing like with like. At Junior Certificate level, there is a raw grade point average difference of 0.6 (out of a maximum of 10) between those who take grinds and those who do not. However, this does not reflect the 'impact' of grinds as we have seen already that those students who take private tuition are more socially advantaged and more ambitious. Taking account of these other factors, the achievement gap narrows by two-thirds to 0.2 grade points per subject. This effect size is smaller than that of spending two or more hours per night on homework and study. At Leaving Certificate level, there is a raw difference of 2.9 grade points (out of 28) between participants and non-participants, a difference which narrows to 0.8 grade points when social background, prior academic performance and school engagement are taken into account. There are good reasons, however, for being cautious in interpreting these findings as evidence of a boost, even a small one, from engaging in private tuition. For both sets of exams, any effect of taking grinds becomes non-significant when the number of higher level subjects is taken into account, which is in itself a reflection of student aspirations. In sum, therefore, the 'effect' of grinds on academic performance is small if not negligible and is more likely to reflect the complex interplay between subject levels and engagement in schoolwork. What appears clearer from the current study findings is the way in which private tuition reinforces an increasingly instrumentalist approach among students, especially those with higher aspirations, in preparing for State examinations, an approach which is rewarded by the mode of assessment used.

High Stakes and Exam-Related Stress

As discussed in Chap. 1, tests can be regarded as 'high stakes' for schools and/or students. In high stakes for school systems, how students within a school fare in national tests or other assessments has consequences for school funding and even reorganisation or a change in governance (Ryan and Weinstein, 2009). Exams may also have high stakes for students, even where they are not linked to formal accountability for schools. The courses taken and grades received in national examinations can often have important consequences for later access to education, training and employment, (Eurydice, 2009). In the Irish context, young people with a Leaving

Certificate qualification have better access to post-school education and training as well as to high-quality, better paid employment (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). Even among those taking the Leaving Certificate exam, higher grades are associated with entry to HE, particularly to courses associated with the élite professions, a smoother transition to employment and greater access to white-collar jobs.

In spite of a large body of research on the impact of high-stakes testing on teaching, much less attention has been paid to the impact on student experiences. Two US studies used student drawings to analyse their perceptions of high-stakes testing (Wheelock et al., 2000; Triplett and Barksdale, 2005). They found that the depictions generally reflected anxiety, anger, boredom and withdrawal, with disaffection greater among older students. In another US study (Noguera, 2007), students were critical of high-stakes testing, feeling it was unfair to judge them on the basis of a single test. Research in England (Putwain, 2009) points to the pressure and stress associated with taking secondary school exams. Research in Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s similarly revealed higher stress levels among exam year groups, especially among female students (Hannan and Shortall, 1991; Smyth, 1999). Although individual factors were the main source of variation in stress levels, the school context, particularly the nature of relations with teachers and peers, was found to exacerbate or reduce stress levels.

The young people in the study cohort were acutely aware of the consequences of exam results for their life chances. Earlier sections of this chapter have highlighted the way in which teaching in the exam years became increasingly geared towards exam preparation. In third year, a recurring term used by many of the students in the group interviews was ‘pressure’, with students feeling that their teachers expected more of them in terms of studying in third year (see Chap. 2). A number of students mentioned that this pressure was stressful, a pattern that was somewhat more common in two of the girls’ schools (Harris Street and Barrack Street, which had contrasting social profiles). There the increased schoolwork and study demands in preparing for the exam were seen as a source of stress:

> It gets mentioned a lot, “You’re in third year now, it’s not second year, you’ve to knuckle down”.
> It’s very stressful, it’s really stressful. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 3rd years)

> They [teachers] put so much pressure on you and stress on you. (Barrack Street, girls, socially mixed, 3rd years)

The pressure of studying for the exams was seen as constraining their free time, with the lack of leisure time itself becoming a source of stress:

> Some days I go home and I won't be able to go out with the amount of homework. (Barrack Street, girls, socially mixed, 3rd years)

> We don't socialize either. You stay in and study and not go anywhere and stuff like that and no one really goes out. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 3rd years)

While preparing for the Junior Certificate exam was taken very seriously by most of the young people in the study cohort, after making the transition to upper secondary education they rapidly reassessed its relative importance.

> 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, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

The Leaving Certificate was objectively a high-stakes exam for the students, with grades determining access to HE and other post-school pathways. Its importance was reflected in student accounts, with the exam seeing as 'big' and an 'all or nothing' opportunity to influence their future life chances:

> Because your whole life depends on it.

> … Your future, if you don't do your Leaving, you don't have anything. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

> It's the biggest exam you'll ever do in your life.
> They [teachers] said it's the hardest one as well. (Lang Street, boys, working-class, 6th years)

> But it is important because like whatever job you are going to do, whether you are forty, you'll still need it if you are going for a job like. You still always need to show your results. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class, 6th years)

The importance of the exam meant that many students, especially girls, reported feelings of stress and strain. As part of the survey, the young people completed an adapted version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), which reflects levels of current strain. Figure 7.8 shows very high levels of current stress, especially among girls. Over half (55%) of the female students reported that they felt constantly under strain 'more' or 'much more' than usual while almost four in ten felt they were losing confidence in themselves and were losing sleep over worry. It should be noted that these survey responses relate to January of the exam year with five months to go until the actual exams. Multivariate models unpacked the factors shaping variation in stress levels (see Smyth et al., 2011). Some aspects of the school experience served to exacerbate or ameliorate stress levels. Stress levels were lower where young people received frequent praise or positive feedback from their teachers (see Chap. 4). In contrast, they had higher stress levels where they had experienced bullying or were dissatisfied with the subjects they had taken for upper secondary education. Students who felt unable to cope with schoolwork had much higher stress levels than their peers. Stress levels were much lower among students taking the LCA programme, who were assessed using a combination of continuous assessment and written exams.

Pressure and stress were also dominant themes in the group interviews with young people. The nature of assessment, being determined by performance over a week or two in June, was seen as fuelling stress:

> One week and that's everything that could end up changing your life (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

> I feel like your whole life is determined on just one week. (Wattle Street, boys, socially mixed, 6th years)

The workload involved in preparing for the exam and the feeling of running out of time were key drivers of student stress:

> It's a lot more stressful I think this year, just all talking about time and how close we are to the exams, and just all work and pressure I think.
> Yeah, there's a lot of pressure on us this year. (Dawson Street, coeducational, socially mixed, 6th years)

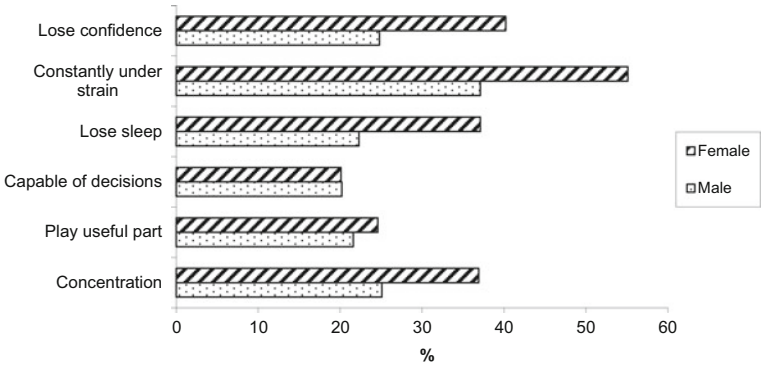

Fig. 7.8 Levels of current stress among Leaving Certificate students

> You just kind of realise how much work really has to get done so just like, [it] dawned on me, 'oh god, there's so much to do', so think it's a lot more stressful. (Harris Street, girls, middle-class, 6th years)

The presence of the exam had led to a strong emphasis on 'covering the course' which meant that not having completed all of the course material itself became a source of stress for young people:

> You start panicking because you're afraid the teachers haven't covered everything.
> Because I know like in History I've got like an entire topic left to cover… so I'm kind of worried. (Fig Lane, coeducational, middle-class, 6th years)

> Sometimes you feel like going 'oh my god like, do you realise how close the exams are like'. We haven't even finished our course in a lot of subjects and we have like another book and a half to go … that really frustrates me. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

As seen earlier in the chapter, many students, particularly girls, were spending long hours on homework and study, which contributed to feelings of tiredness and constrained the time available to engage in social activities.

> It's constant pressure, like you just don't get any relief from it. Because even at the weekends, if you are not doing something, you feel guilty and it's like you can't get away from it. Even if you have nothing to do, you'll still feel guilty like. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

> You literally don't get a break from school work, I mean yeah like we can go out at weekends or whatever but…
> But it's still on your mind.
> It's always on your mind. (Belmore Street, girls, socially mixed, 6th years)

In sum, the high-stakes nature and mode of assessment for the Leaving Certificate contributed to student stress. Interestingly, a follow-up study of this cohort of young people three years later indicated that their stress levels were much lower than they had been in their final year of school (McCoy et al., 2014).

Conclusions

Ireland is a revealing case study of the potential impact of high-stakes examinations on student experiences of teaching and learning. A number of studies across very different curriculum and examination systems (see e.g. Duffy and Elwood, 2013; EPPI, 2005; Gorard and See, 2011; Lumby, 2011) have highlighted commonalities in young people's preferences for more active engagement in learning and the potential to make their opinions felt within the classroom. The current study findings indicate similar views among Irish students who prefer student-centred approaches to the teacher-dominated classes they typically experience. The contrast between student preferences and actual experiences is especially evident in the exam years, where teachers often focus on 'covering the course' in preparation for the exam. What is novel in the Irish findings is the way in which young people who had previously valued more active engagement become more instrumentalist in their views as they approach their final exams, expressing intolerance of teachers who do not focus on what is likely to appear on the examination papers.

As well as distorting teaching and learning within school, high-stakes exams strongly influence the nature of learning outside school. As young people move into their final year of secondary education, they spend a considerable amount of time on homework and study after school, a workload which serves as a source of stress to many. In addition, private

tuition becomes an important feature of the educational experience, with the majority of middle-class students and those in schools with a concentration of middle-class students taking such tuition.

Performance in the Leaving Certificate exam has real consequences for young people's life chances, determining their access to particular institutions and courses within HE and influencing their employment chances if they enter the labour market directly. Young people are themselves acutely aware of these consequences, with many experiencing high levels of stress in anticipation of the exam. Stress levels are particularly acute among female students, a group who are already spending considerable amounts of time on studying. While a good deal of the international literature focuses on the impact of high stakes for schools, exams with high stakes for students are found to have very dramatic consequences for the type of learning in which young people engage and for their more general well-being.

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusions

Contribution of the Study

The findings presented in this book have significant implications for policy development at the national and school levels, and these policy issues will be teased out in the following sections of the chapter. Before doing so, it is worth examining what can be learnt from the PPLS about young people's experiences as they move through the schooling system. While located within particular schools in a specific national context, that of Ireland, the study yields important insights into the way in which system and school factors can shape student experiences and outcomes. The mixed method longitudinal nature of the study provides rich information on changes in student attitudes and behaviours, privileging their voice while relating their accounts to the broader environment of school organisation and process, as reported on by key personnel in the school. While the study findings have encompassed a number of different aspects of school experience, this section focuses on the contribution of the study in relation to four dimensions in particular: transitions and trends, the impact of social class and school composition, the role of ability grouping in fostering educational inequality, and the impact of high-stakes examinations on student experiences of teaching and learning.

E. Smyth, *Students' Experiences and Perspectives on Secondary Education*, DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-49385-9_8

Transitions, Trends and Turning Points

Many of the study findings confirmed previous findings from international research. This was particularly evident in relation to the transition from primary to secondary school, where the study echoed previous findings regarding the mixed emotions of excitement and nervousness evident among first-year students and the importance of peer relations in facilitating settling into the new school setting (see e.g. Galton et al., 1999, 2000; O'Brien, 2004). In contrast, few previous studies have addressed the transition to upper secondary education, except where this involves moving from one type of school to another, for example, from middle or compulsory school to high school or equivalent (Darmody, 2008; Langenkamp, 2009). The study findings indicate that, even though Irish students do not change school, the transition can be a difficult one, with increasing academic demands placed on young people and the requirement to choose a set of subjects and subject levels which will potentially shape their future life chances. In contrast to the transition from primary to secondary, few, if any, specific supports are put in place by schools to help students deal with this transition.

Previous research has focused not only on transition points but on longer term trends in student engagement and achievement. Two relatively common features emerge from this research. Firstly, as a result of the turbulence of the transition into secondary school, there is commonly a 'dip' in achievement among young people in the initial period of lower secondary education (Whitby et al., 2006). Secondly, there is evidence of a gradual decline in school engagement as young people move through the system (Van de gaer et al., 2009; Wang and Eccles, 2012). The PPLS data indicate the importance of relating these patterns to the specific structure of the educational, and indeed examination, system. There is indeed a dip for some students and a hiatus for many in academic skill development over their first year in secondary education (Smyth et al., 2004). Work by Eccles et al., (1993) has attributed this pattern to the mismatch (the 'stage-environment fit') between young people's developmental needs and the structured environment of school on entry to secondary education. While this mismatch is undoubtedly a factor, the longitudinal nature of the current study contributes to a more complex picture of trends in engagement and disengagement over the school career. Probably the most striking finding that emerged was the importance of experiences in the second year of lower secondary education for subsequent outcomes. The

research found that the turbulence of the transition process often concealed important differences among students in first year; by second year, there were clear differences between those who were engaged in schoolwork and those who were drifting or even disengaging. This pattern in conjunction with the tone set in terms of interaction with teachers had long-term effects on exam performance, early school leaving and post-school plans. Thus, for many young people, second year, a hiatus in terms of their encounter with standardised examinations, became a significant turning point for their future educational career. This pattern is not easily explicable in terms of the stage-environment fit. While the cohort in this study are at the same stage, a more recent analysis of the Growing Up in Ireland study (Smyth forthcoming) indicates that, in spite of being the same age (13 years old), young people in second year are much more polarised in terms of their school engagement than similar students in first year. Thus, stage of schooling appears a much more significant driver of experiences than age (or developmental stage). The transition to upper secondary education represented a further turning point, albeit one coloured by lower secondary experiences, with an acceleration in the investment in homework and study among many young people, especially girls and those attending socially mixed or middle-class schools (see below).

The nature of the curriculum and assessment system in Ireland results in a 'one-way' system for many young people, whereby choices around which subjects to take or what level to study a subject at are constrained by earlier choices or even by school and teacher decisions. Like Ryrie's (1981) research in Scotland, which found that the degree of choice afforded students may at times be illusory, the findings point to the way in which young people's choices are framed by school structures and access to information and for some groups of students, especially those in lower stream classes (see below), more or less determined by their position within the school. This channelling process, coupled with a lack of full information on the implications of choices, means that many young people reach their final year of school regretting the subjects they have selected and wishing they had chosen differently.

Social Class and School Composition

The structuring of student experiences by social class and gender has been a dominant theme in the sociology of education (see e.g. Francis and Skelton, 2005; Lareau and Conley, 2008). The study findings show

that both gender and social class differences in engagement widen over the course of the schooling career, as evidenced by investment of time in homework and study and the extent to which schoolwork is experienced as increasingly challenging. There has been considerable debate in the research literature about whether gender and class are additive or multiplicative factors, that is, whether the gender gap in engagement or achievement is constant across social classes or whether working-class boys experience disproportionately high levels of disengagement. Connolly's (2006) analyses of lower secondary exam results in England point to a constant gender gap in achievement across social and ethnic groups. Other researchers (e.g. Dekkers et al., 2000) point to complex interactions between gender, class and ethnicity in shaping student outcomes. The study findings in this book support the latter perspective, with working-class boys showing the greatest levels of disengagement while working-class girls display a more contradictory position, being more invested in schoolwork than their male counterparts but at the same time experiencing negative interaction with their teachers.

The nature of secondary school selection, along with patterns of residential segregation, in Ireland means that schools vary significantly in the social mix of students who attend them. This variation allowed us to explore the extent to which school composition shaped young people's experiences. While the existence of a 'composition effect' has been the subject of much debate internationally (Harker and Tymms, 2004; Marks, 2015; Nash, 2003), previous evidence indicates that school social mix in Ireland has an impact on patterns of early school leaving, examination performance and the likelihood of going on to HE (Smyth, 1999; Smyth and Hannan, 2007). Similar patterns are found among the case-study schools in our sample but the study findings allow us to go further by unpacking some of the reasons underlying these outcomes.

Rigid forms of ability grouping are more commonly used in schools serving working-class populations, a pattern which contributes to disengagement and underperformance among some groups of young people, particularly working-class boys (see below). However, even in schools using mixed ability base classes, the interaction of teacher and student expectations can result in lower take-up of more academically demanding subject levels in working-class schools, even taking account of prior achievement levels. This lower take-up sets limits on young people's exam performance and therefore on the pathways upon to them upon leaving school.

While significant variation is found in experiences and outcomes by individual social class background (see above), greater differentiation is found between working-class and middle-class or socially mixed schools. The concept of institutional habitus (McDonough, 1997; Reay et al., 2001) is useful in explaining this differentiation. In middle-class schools, the idea of going on to HE assumes a taken-for-granted quality with students deciding which institution to attend or which field of study to pursue rather than whether to go to university at all (Smyth and Banks, 2012a). This habitus is then embedded in school practices, such as the orientation of career guidance classes and the expectation that all students will take exam subjects at higher level unless they explicitly opt out (see McDonough, 1997, on similar patterns in the US context). In response to this academic climate, students accelerate their investment of time in homework and study in preparation for high-stakes exams at the end of upper secondary education. In contrast, in working-class schools, take-up of higher level courses can be constrained by the use of rigid ability grouping and/or by lower expectations among teachers and students. There is no assumption in these schools that students will go on to university and, in some instances, young people report being advised to seek 'appropriate', that is, lower level, post-school pathways.

Perhaps the main expression of institutional habitus is the nature of school climate, that is, the quality of day-to-day interaction between teachers and students. There is a large body of international research showing a strong association between the quality of relationships between teacher and students and a number of student outcomes (see e.g. Eccles and Roeser, 2011; Cohen et al., 2009; Martin and Dowson, 2009; Crosnoe et al., 2004). The PPLS found a similarly powerful impact of teacher–student relations on student outcomes, especially school retention and academic achievement. While inequalities in teacher–student power relations were evident across schools, marked differences in student–teacher interaction patterns between students in working-class schools and other groups of students contributed to differential levels of school engagement as young people moved through the school system. Disengagement was especially evident among, but by no means limited to, working-class boys, some of whom got caught up in a negative dynamic of being reprimanded by teachers and acting out in response, a cycle that culminated for many in early school leaving or low examination grades. Interaction patterns therefore emerge as classed and indeed gendered and explain a good deal of the variation in outcomes observed among the study cohort.

Ability Grouping

International research has suggested an at best neutral and at worst negative impact of rigid ability grouping (streaming) on student academic outcomes (Ireson and Hallam, 2001; Kutnick et al., 2005), though it continues to be advocated as a tool for reform in many political contexts (Francis et al., 2016). In Ireland, the use of streaming at secondary level has declined markedly since the 1980s but now, while reduced in prevalence, it is disproportionately represented in schools serving working-class populations. Such a pattern has not been hitherto documented elsewhere but would bear further investigation from a comparative perspective.

There is no straightforward relationship between the span of achievement levels in the school intake and the use of rigid ability grouping. Indeed, most of the case-study schools employing streaming had a relatively narrow, and low, range of ability levels among first year students and thus were making seemingly precise distinctions between students who did not vary markedly in their 'ability'. Interviews with key personnel in the case-study schools indicate that the use of streaming tends to be motivated by two factors: the desire to have 'one good class' in a working-class school, implicitly by allocating perceived troublemakers to other class groups, and the wish to match the pace of instruction to the needs of students. In fact, there was greater perceived mismatch in the pace of instruction in streamed classes, with a significant proportion of higher stream groups feeling teachers went too quickly while a significant minority of lower stream classes reported the pace was too slow and felt insufficiently challenged by their schoolwork. Allocation to lower stream classes resulted in curriculum differentiation in many instances, with these class groups less likely to study a foreign language and much more likely to take subjects at foundation or ordinary level. The study found significantly lower exam grades among those in lower stream classes than in mixed ability or higher/middle stream classes, even taking account of prior levels of achievement in reading and mathematics. This underperformance was related to two factors. Firstly, the assumption that students would take lower secondary subjects at foundation or ordinary level set a ceiling on their overall potential achievement as well as having implications for the pathways open to them within upper secondary education and beyond. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, a climate of lower expectations and more negative interaction between teachers and students emerged within lower stream classes. Even in October of first year, students were

very clear where they stood in the hierarchy of ability grouping and had absorbed the label of being the 'dumb' or 'stupid' class. These factors contributed to student disengagement, with a very significant group (six in ten) of those allocated to lower stream classes in first year leaving school before the end of upper secondary education. Although this group of young people dropped out of school before the start of the recession, their post-school trajectories were characterised by unemployment or, at best, intermittent, low-paid employment (see Byrne and Smyth, 2010).

The fact that ability grouping was more commonly used in schools serving a socio-economically disadvantaged population thus played a role in reinforcing social class differences in engagement and achievement. In addition, boys were more likely to attend schools which used streaming and more likely to be allocated to a lower stream class within those schools. Thus, the use of rigid ability grouping helped explain some of the gender gap found in educational outcomes.

The Impact of High-Stakes Examinations

A large body of research has emerged, mostly because of policy changes in the USA, about the impact of high-stakes testing on schools (Shephard and Dougherty, 1991; Au, 2007). The reward structure attached to examination performance sends a message to teachers and students about what work is valued (Brookhart, 1997; Ellwood, 2001), with an incentive for teachers and students to concentrate on what is likely to be assessed (Wiliam, 2001). This research has, however, rarely considered the impact of this approach on student experiences of teaching and learning. Exceptions were two US studies which highlighted feelings of anxiety, anger, boredom and withdrawal among students in relation to high-stakes tests (Wheelock et al., 2000; Triplett and Barksdale, 2005). In many ways, this research has overshadowed the debate on the impact of high-stakes, summative exams on students in systems where the stakes are high for young people rather than schools. Some research, however, does point to increased student stress in the run up to State examinations in England (see e.g. Putwain, 2009).

Ireland represents an interesting case study of the impact of high-stakes examinations. The Leaving Certificate, taken at the end of upper secondary education, is very high stakes in nature, as exam grades determine access to HE and to high-quality employment. Its importance is reflected in the prominence given to exam coverage in national newspapers, which

provide a daily account of 'what came up' in the exams. The young people interviewed for this study were acutely aware of its impact on their future life chances and many were critical of the almost sole reliance on written exams in many subjects, giving the exam an 'all or nothing' quality. High levels of stress were found among young people, especially among girls, even midway through their final year of school, with many losing sleep over worry and losing confidence in themselves. The long hours spent by many, again especially girls, on homework and study constrained involvement in social activities, which in turn fuelled the hothouse climate of exam preparation.

The presence of a high-stakes exam at the end of lower and upper secondary levels also influenced the nature of teaching and learning, with many classes dominated by teacher talk, focused on 'covering the course' and practising previous exam papers to prepare for the upcoming exam. Throughout their schooling career, young people, like their peers in very different educational systems (see e.g. EPPI, 2005; Gorard and See, 2011; Lumby, 2011), favoured more interactive classes, with a variety of approaches, hands-on activities and the chance to voice their opinion. By their final year, however, many young people, especially those who aspired to more prestigious, high-demand university courses, adopted an increasingly instrumental view of teaching and learning, expressing impatience with teachers who did not focus on what was likely to appear on the examination paper. This orientation also fuelled an increase in the take-up of private tuition (shadow education) in the exam years, with such 'grinds' seen as useful in focusing on exam preparation rather than more general education.

The Implications for Educational Reform

The study findings have pointed to the way in which the current mode of assessment at lower and upper secondary levels has driven the nature of teaching and learning in the classroom and set the tone for young people's later engagement with education. The study derived from a concern with the nature of lower secondary education and, in turn, provided an evidence base which contributed to ongoing policy debate about educational reform. As such, it represents an interesting case study in the research–policy relationship and the complexity of translating evidence into practice. This section outlines the context within which the study took place as a basis for exploring potential policy options.

The Junior Certificate (lower secondary education) programme was introduced in 1989 to provide a coherent unified programme for all students for the first three years of secondary education. Its guiding principles were breadth and balance, relevance, quality, continuity and progression, and coherence (Department of Education, 1995). Junior cycle culminated in a set of examinations set and marked by the State Examinations Commission. As with the Intermediate Certificate which preceded it, these exams largely comprised written assessments, with some oral assessment and/or practical exercises in specific subjects. Despite the broader vision of the Junior Certificate, concerns were expressed fairly early on that the new model was leading to a focus on rote learning and teacher-centred methodologies (Coolahan, 1994). A review of the curriculum, led by the NCCA, involved the commissioning of the research study upon which this book draws. In 2010, the NCCA published a report, *Innovation and Identity: Ideas for a New Junior Cycle*, which drew on the empirical research and concerns among stakeholders to highlight issues for the future development of junior cycle as a basis for further consultation with stakeholders and a network of secondary schools. The motivation to reform junior cycle was further reinforced by increases in school retention rates which meant that the Junior Certificate was no longer a terminal exam for those who wanted to move into the labour market or apprenticeships. The period of consultation on junior cycle culminated in the publication of *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle* in 2011 (NCCA, 2011) and subsequently *A Framework for Junior Cycle* in 2012 (Department of Education and Skills, 2012). In their document *A Framework for Junior Cycle*, the NCCA addressed the question of 'why change?' by explicitly drawing on the study findings:

> There is significant evidence of the need to change junior cycle provision. For example, a significant number of first-year students do not make progress in English and Mathematics. A number of second-year students disengage from their learning and in many instances, do not reconnect. The experience of many third-year students is dominated by preparation for the Junior Certificate examination where the emphasis is on rote learning and on rehearsing questions for the examination. (NCCA, 2012, p.1)

The model of lower secondary reform set out in these documents, and later announced by the Minister for Education and Skills, potentially represented a sea change in the nature of Irish secondary education, with the central elements including:

- A shift away from an exam-dominated mode of assessment which rewards rote learning towards a more student-centred approach which takes account of learning and progress over a two-year period;
- The embedding of key skills in teaching and learning;
- The provision of flexibility at the school level to shape a programme of subjects, short courses and other learning opportunities, with young people taking fewer subjects than at present;
- The adoption of a common level (rather than higher and ordinary level) for all subjects (except Irish, English and Maths).

These proposals not only reflected some of the evidence provided by the PPLS but also echoed broader concerns among the policy community. The adoption of a common level would help reduce the variation found in the take-up of higher level subjects found in the case-study schools and would perhaps diminish the rationale for streaming.[1] The study findings presented a strong critique of a reliance on exam-based assessment alone. Furthermore, although a number of commentators have argued that coursework-based assessment benefits girls (Gorard, 2004; Machin and McNally, 2006), the study findings show a long-standing gender gap in achievement in favour of girls within an exam-based system. The study findings did not, however, present a clear-cut case for reducing the number of subjects. From the student perspective, there was no evidence of the curriculum overload that had been suggested by stakeholders, with no variation in experiences or outcomes according to the number of exam subjects taken. However, fewer subjects could be used to increase the amount of time available for more authentic learning experiences, although more flexible course offerings do run the risk of increasing rather than reducing class- and gender-based choices (Iannelli et al., 2015; Van de Werfhorst and Mijs, 2010). The emphasis on key skills was derived from ongoing work by the NCCA which initially looked at the role of key skills in upper secondary education (NCCA, 2009).

The announcement of the proposed reform was met by strong opposition from the two secondary teachers' unions, the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) and the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), who pointed to the lack of consultation with teachers. Both ASTI and TUI had been represented on the Council of the NCCA but argued that the Minister's announcement had gone further than the initial proposals. The main criticism of the reform by teacher unions centred on the idea of having school-based assessment. However, many commentators have

suggested that opposition has also been fuelled by the cumulative effect of 'austerity' policies, including a reduction in teacher pay and curtailed expenditure on education. There followed a period of further lobbying, two one-day strikes and further negotiations between the teacher unions and the Department of Education and Skills. An amended proposal (the so-called Travers Report, Department of Education and Skills, 2015b) was put forward, which could be regarded as a dilution of the original proposals. Crucially, the proposal indicated that 60% of the assessment would be based on an externally set and marked examination. This could mean that the presence of the examination would continue to have a backwash effect on teaching and learning over the course of lower secondary education. These proposals were accepted by one of the unions but rejected by the other. At the time of writing, new curricula and short courses are being developed but ASTI members, who voted to oppose cooperation with the reform, will not participate in continuous professional development to support the reform.

The politicisation of this reform has meant that public discourse has focused almost exclusively on assessment rather than other important issues. However, the findings of this study indicate a number of other potential challenges to the successful implementation of lower secondary reform. The proposals envisage a more interactive learning environment with young people playing a more active role in their own learning. Examples of curriculum implementation from Ireland and elsewhere point to the challenges in broadening the type of teaching and learning in the classroom. For example, an emphasis on the student as active learner is strongly reflected in the Irish Primary Curriculum but evidence indicates that whole-class teaching remains the dominant approach used in the classroom, with less use of group work and the more active methodologies than had been envisaged in the original curriculum document (NCCA, 2005, 2008; McCoy et al., 2012). The success of the reform will therefore crucially depend on the professional development and planning support provided to schools and teachers in implementing the curriculum. The number of subjects to be assessed will be reduced to between eight and ten, from the previous average of 11 or 12 exam subjects. There will be a potential tension for schools in deciding which kinds of subjects to provide to their students. Previous research (Darmody and Smyth, 2005) has indicated that schools take account of the gender, social and ability profile of students in their schools in deciding on which subjects to offer. While this may help schools to cater to the needs of their students, there

is a risk that this may result in gendered and classed curricular offerings. Depending on how schools organise subject choice, there is therefore a risk of differential student access to a broad range of subject areas, an issue which has important implications for later options at upper secondary level and in post-school education.

Perhaps even more crucially the absence of upper secondary reform potentially jeopardises the success of changes at lower secondary level. As indicated in Chapter 2, upper secondary education in Ireland culminates in a terminal exam, the Leaving Certificate, largely based on external written assessment. This exam is very 'high stakes' as performance in it determines access to HE and influences access to employment. The exam is found to have an even stronger 'backwash' effect than the Junior Certificate, with teaching and learning heavily focused on exam preparation, high stress levels among students and a high take-up of private tuition. In order to address some of these issues, a change in the grading structure for the Leaving Certificate from 2017 has been announced and there are proposals to move towards broader entry courses within HE in order to reduce the pressure on students to secure high grades. Despite these (proposed) changes, the Leaving Certificate will remain a high-stakes exam and as such will be a very different learning experience to the reformed lower secondary level. Furthermore, there has been very little discussion of the implications of the changes for transition between lower and upper secondary education. Existing research points to difficulties for students in the present system in coping with the increased demands of upper secondary education (see Chap. 2). Lower secondary reform, in the absence of significant changes within upper secondary education, is likely to contribute to a greater mismatch between the two stages. Without equivalent reform at upper secondary level, young people will move from a richer and engaging learning experience to a narrower one focused on the terminal exam. There is also a danger that even though assessment approaches will become more varied at lower secondary level, the high-stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate will (continue to) have a 'backwash' effect on earlier stages.

Reform or No Change? School-Level Implementation

Chapter 1 has pointed to the centralised nature of the Irish educational system coupled with a certain degree of autonomy on the part of schools over important practices, such as ability grouping and approach to subject

choice. It would appear, therefore, that, even in the absence of large-scale system reform, there is leeway at the school level to develop the kinds of approaches which enhance student engagement and learning. The study findings point to a number of areas in which schools could facilitate more positive student outcomes. These centre on teaching methods, the approach to subject choice, the use of ability grouping and the nature of school climate.

The dominance of exam-based assessment in the Irish context has, in many ways, distorted the nature of teaching and learning away from more authentic experiences towards a more instrumentalist approach. While exam preparation does constrain time and space within the school day, there is still variation among teachers, between subjects and year groups in the kinds of teaching methods used. Young people's critique of teacher-centred methods is, to a great extent, informed by their experiences of a different way of teaching and learning. A number of initiatives, such as the TL21 professional development programme (Hogan et al., 2007) and the pilot schools involved in the Junior Cycle network as well as innovations by individual schools, have sought to support teachers in developing more student-centred approaches, even within an exam-oriented context, and these examples provide a potential model for future development at school level.

Throughout their schooling career, young people make a series of choices—about the subjects they will take, the levels at which they will study these subjects, and the pathway they will pursue upon leaving school. In making these choices, students are highly reliant on their parents as a source of information and guidance, but there are marked social class differences in parents' own familiarity with how the system works and knowledge of how best to help their child navigate through it. The study findings point to the importance of postponing the selection of lower secondary subjects so that young people can make a more informed choice by 'sampling' different subject areas rather than using classed and gendered assumptions about the nature of these subjects. While exposure to subjects is important, it is not sufficient to ensure an informed choice in the absence of school-based advice and guidance. Young people making the transition to upper secondary level often found that subjects were not what they expected and many expressed regret about the pathways they had selected. These findings highlight the importance of a whole-school approach to guidance, with advice and information from subject

teachers, coupled with more specialist guidance to enable choices which leave opportunities open for the future.

The existence of separate levels (higher, ordinary and foundation) in subjects at lower and upper secondary level facilitates, but does not determine, the use of ability grouping. Irish secondary schools display an unusual feature in that rigid ability grouping (streaming) is disproportionately prevalent in working-class schools. Streaming is found to lead to lower exam grades among those allocated to lower stream classes, without any concomitant benefit for higher stream groups. Moving away from streaming would mean that schools would raise average levels of achievement while also reducing the gender and social class gap in exam performance. It is evident that mixed ability base classes do not necessarily lead to mixed ability teaching, with many schools using setting for Maths, Irish and, to some extent, English. Setting does not have the same negative effects as streaming, though early selection into higher 'sets' does constrain take-up of higher level subjects. The study findings also point to the role of the overall habitus of the school, the interplay of teacher and student expectations, in increasing access to, and take-up of, higher level subjects.

Perhaps the most important influence a school has is in the climate it fosters for its students. This climate can be seen as encompassing two interrelated dimensions—the democratic climate of the school and the quality of day-to-day interaction between teachers and students. The findings point to a mismatch between the autonomy granted to (older) teenagers outside school and their construction as 'children' or 'child-adults' within school. International research has pointed to the challenge of giving students a voice in school decision-making (see Chap. 5). The evidence from elsewhere, and from this study, indicates that student councils are not sufficient to give young people a real input into school policy and practice. However, the study findings do not point to a clear solution as to how this could be resolved when broader power dynamics between teachers and students remain unequal. The findings do suggest two potential avenues for exploration at the school level. Firstly, the way in which school discipline policies are framed and implemented can disempower young people and foster disengagement. School discipline policies (or at least their enforcement) often accord as much emphasis to uniform and personal appearance as to more fundamental issues of how to treat others. As a result, many students feel that school rules are arbitrary in nature and do

not see a clear justification for obeying them. The involvement of students in developing the school discipline policy would appear to provide some way of grounding 'rules of engagement' within young people's own priorities and lived experience. Furthermore, 'escalating consequences' (Raby, 2012) can mean that students who have engaged in recurrent low-level misbehaviour can face the same sanctions (such as suspension) as those who have engaged in one-off more serious behaviour. A very significant proportion of students in working-class schools in this study had been suspended from school, an approach which did not seem to improve student behaviour and, in some instances, led to early school leaving. Reframing school discipline policy away from negative sanction towards positive reinforcement could serve to improve the school climate and thus enhance student well-being and learning, especially in working-class schools.

Secondly, student accounts were dominated by the naming of unfair and inconsistent treatment by teachers. While acknowledging that teachers differed markedly in how they treated students, negative interaction appeared to crowd out the positive for many students. It is not clear that teachers are always aware of their impact on students, but young people who had been frequently reprimanded had much poorer outcomes, both academically and socially. Reciprocity of respect emerged as a crucial element in a positive school culture, with a negative dynamic of being reprimanded and acting out in response emerging in some settings and culminating in school disengagement, underperformance and early school leaving. Given the impact of educational attainment on young people's future life chances in Ireland, breaking this cycle is all the more important.

In conclusion, listening to young people provides a fertile basis for considering how systems and schools should be organised. It points to a fundamental mismatch between the kinds of teaching that engage students and the approaches that prepare them for exams, and between their lives outside school and their treatment within it. It is vital that we keep listening.

Note

1. At the same time, the retention of separate subject levels for Irish, English, and Maths could still lead to inequalities in access to, and take-up, of higher levels.

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