

# ESRI research into the experiences of students in the third year of junior cycle and in transition to senior cycle

Summary and commentary

October 2007



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# 1. Introduction

In early 2002, as part of the review of junior cycle, NCCA commissioned the Educational Policy Research Centre of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) to engage in a longitudinal study of students' experiences of curriculum in the first three years of their post-primary schooling. Since then, the ESRI has engaged with a purposive sample of twelve schools, conducting research with principals, teachers, parents and over 900 students in these schools. The purpose of the research is to inform the NCCA's advice on curriculum provision and assessment, and on teaching and learning in junior cycle, with an overall aim to enhance the educational experience of, and outcomes for, students at this age and stage of their development. Funding for the study has also been provided by the Gender Equality Unit of the Department of Education and Science.

Longitudinal studies are rare in education, largely due to their complexity and cost and the need to commit to a long-term project. This longitudinal study moves beyond snapshots to examine trends in the educational experiences of students over time—exploring how particular groups of students change and adapt as they move through the school system. This approach can help identify students who are benefiting from and thriving in the system and, conversely, those who are 'at risk' of school disengagement or early school leaving. It also facilitates analysis of the extent to which initial post-primary experiences are predictive of later processes and outcomes.

The NCCA's commitment to this research project reflects two emerging trends in policy making. The first of these is the increasing use of evidence in informing policy, particularly evidence from the site of implementation. The second, a trend particular to education policy making, is the inclusion of the student perspective. Capturing 'the student voice' has brought research closer to the everyday experience of the recipients of the educational system—those most affected by and with the greatest stake in the educational process. The NCCA was involved as lead institution in a recently completed project funded by the Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe (CIDREE). This initiative sought to establish the extent to which students are consulted in matters of curriculum and education policy

and how students' opinions are subsequently represented in reform proposals or policy statements.

## 1.1 First Year Study

The first year study, completed in 2003, focused on the experiences of students making the transition from primary to post-primary education from the perspective of principals, teachers, parents and the students themselves. It looked at the nature and effectiveness of the different support structures used by the post-primary schools to help students settle in to 'big school'. The curriculum offered to first year students was also explored in the study, as was the nature and perceived effectiveness of teaching and learning, and how students' attitudes to school changed over their first year. Importantly, each student was tested in reading and mathematics on entry to and at the end of first year to provide a baseline for subsequent achievement.

Most of the case study schools had well-developed induction programmes in place to help students settle in to post-primary school, and the majority of students had a positive experience of the transition process. A majority of first year students enjoyed school, liked the subjects they were taking and got on well with teachers. However, the study found that certain groups of students took longer to settle in. Girls, students with low self-confidence, international students and students from a Traveller background were among those groups.

Importantly, the first year research found evidence of discontinuities in students' experiences of curriculum, teaching and learning between primary and post-primary school. Teaching methods in first year often differed considerably from students' experience in primary school. There were variations in the level of difficulty of subjects, some perceived as being harder, some easier than 6th class.

The research found that students became less positive about school over the course of first year. This was particularly true for students in the lower streams in schools where streaming was used. While principals and teachers interviewed as part of the study felt that the junior cycle curriculum was suitable for a majority of first year students, they considered course content to be too challenging for a significant minority and questioned the suitability of the curriculum for some students.

The report emphasised the value of ensuring continuity in students' learning experiences from primary to post-primary school and the importance of providing some subject choice for students, particularly access to more practically orientated subjects. It also noted that—over and above formal support structures—schools could help students settle in by fostering a positive climate and positive staff/student relationships within the school.

The findings of the first year research were published in 2004 as *Moving Up: The experiences of first year students in post-primary education*. A booklet for schools, teachers and parents, with the same title, was published at the same time. A commentary on the research findings was also developed, and published on the NCCA website.

## 1.2 Second Year Study

The second year study, completed in 2005, focused on the 'middle year' of junior cycle. The study looked at students' attitudes to being in second year, their views on teaching and learning, on subjects and subject choice and on the way classes are organised within their school. The study found that second year was a difficult year for both students and teachers. There was a general 'dip' in students' academic performance, an increase in misbehaviour generally and a further decline in students' attitude to school and to teachers.

Second year was seen by the study as a pivotal year for many students. Most students engaged more fully with the learning process and with school life. Girls, those from professional backgrounds and those with higher academic ability were in the majority in this group. Worryingly, however, a second group of students had begun to emerge—those who were drifting and even disengaging from study and school life. These students were more often boys from lower socio-economic backgrounds and in lower streams in schools where streaming was practiced.

The negative effects of streaming were also seen to have intensified, particularly for students in lower streams. These students had lower educational aspirations, experienced a narrower curriculum, were less likely to have access to active teaching

methods, and were usually restricted to taking subjects at Ordinary or Foundation level—a factor that would have long term implications for their future educational pathways.

The impending Junior Certificate examination, still more than a year away, was becoming a more prominent feature in second year, influencing the curriculum offered and the nature of teaching and learning. The increasing demands that this placed on students, were also seen to contribute to student disengagement.

The findings of the second year research were published in 2006 as *Pathways through the junior cycle: The experiences of second year students*. A commentary on the report was published on the NCCA website and a summary of the findings was published in the April 2006 issue of *info@ncca*.

### 1.3 Outcomes of the first and second year research

The findings of the first and second year research have informed existing NCCA activities—such as the initiative in assessment for learning— and have also influenced the development and direction of new initiatives—such as the DVD for parents of primary school children, the development of subject factsheets for parents and students entering post-primary school, the mobile assisted language learning (MALL) pilot, and the proposed new bridging framework, a strand of *Project Maths*.

The work to date has been characterised by three features: providing accessible information for parents on how their children’s education ‘works’; supporting teachers in adopting teaching methods that increase student motivation and learning, and working more closely with schools to ensure that curriculum development and innovation is rooted in the reality of the classroom.

### 1.4 Third Year Study

The third year research report, entitled *Gearing up for the Exam?*, the subject of this commentary, is based on two phases of data collection. The first set was collected in the period January to March 2005, a few months before the 900 students in the case study schools sat their Junior Certificate examination. This enabled the researchers to explore the changes in students’ attitudes as they moved into third year, their

engagement with and experience of the curriculum and the learning process, and their attitudes to study and homework. Students' expectations and views regarding the impending Junior Certificate Examination were also analysed.

Importantly, the study continued post June 2005, with a second phase of data collection that allowed for the analysis of the performance of the students in the Junior Certificate examination. In addition, a phase of the research considered the senior cycle options available to students, the options they chose and their initial perceptions of the programmes they were taking.

The sections that follow summarise the main findings of the third year study and pick up some of the key themes relevant to the ongoing work of the NCCA, with particular focus on junior cycle. The commentary will also refer to the first and second year studies, tracing trends in the findings over time. A number of graphs, tables and quotations from the research report have been included to illustrate particular points or trends.

## 2. The third year experience

As in first and second year, the majority of third year students in the survey reported that they enjoyed school and got on well with teachers and with their peers. There was, however, a decline in students' positive attitudes towards school over the course of junior cycle and this continued in third year. Some students put this down to teachers becoming stricter and putting more pressure on them as the Junior Certificate examination approached. A negative attitude to school was greatest among boys, those in streamed schools, and in the higher and middle streams in those schools. Over 20% of students surveyed strongly agreed that they *did not* look forward to going to school and more than 10% of students *did not* find schoolwork interesting. One in ten students felt isolated in school, scared, alone, ignored or without any friends.

For students, positive interaction with teachers was characterised by being able to ask questions in class, being praised for answers in class and for good written work, and being treated fairly and with respect, reflecting their maturity. Examples of negative

interaction presented by students included not receiving any positive feedback on their work, being given out to frequently for misbehaviour in class or for not having their work done. A pattern seemed to emerge where students who misbehaved attracted negative attention by teachers, becoming caught in a cycle of misbehaviour and subsequent punishment.

Students also responded negatively to instances where the teacher appeared to favour some students over others. Within co-educational schools, boys were more likely to report being given out to by teachers than girls. Over half of the students in the survey felt that teachers were stricter than their parents and just under half felt that school rules were unfair.

Regarding peer interaction, students in the case study schools reported that they got on well with others in their year. They put this down to having been together over the course of junior cycle and being more mature. In addition, students reported that the amount of bullying, especially prevalent in first year, had levelled off somewhat in third year.

## 2.1 Commentary

*Many schools are all too aware of the increasing negativity of some groups of students as they move through junior cycle. But hearing from students themselves that they do not find school interesting and that one in five does not even look forward to going to school is a real cause for concern. There may be no single reason why this is so. Growing academic demands are a contributory factor, and learning may not always be engaging, but the fact that a high proportion of these students are boys suggests that there may be something else going on. It would seem, in some instances, that boys are almost expected to misbehave. Students in lower streams are also experiencing a more impoverished curriculum and not getting enough encouragement or challenge to maintain their interest and engagement.*

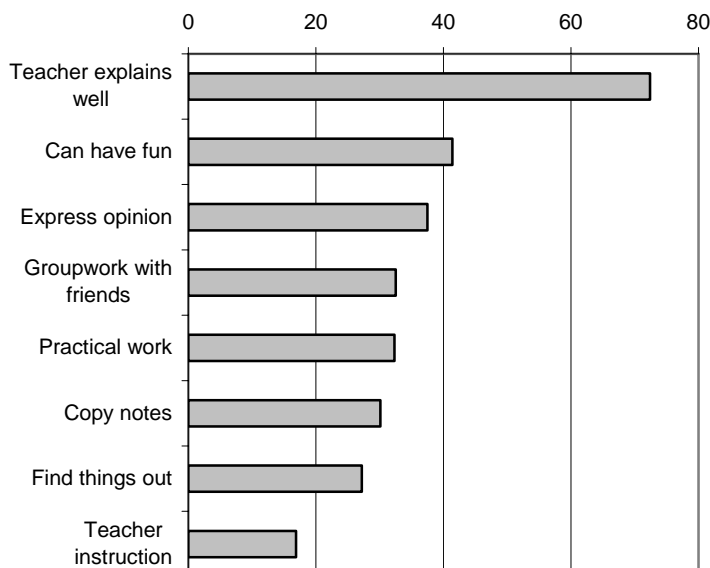
*Students' attitudes to school rules are interesting. While it may not be that surprising for students to consider the rules to be unfair, their views on unequal treatment are of note.*

*According to the research, some case study schools have been particularly successful in maintaining student interest and engagement. They may not even have strong formal support structures, but have fostered a positive and supportive school climate and encouraged good teacher-student interactions. And, as will be shown later, by adopting a mixed-ability approach, they have avoided the dangers of marginalising whole groups of students. It is important that these ‘success stories’ are shared so that other schools can be encouraged to adopt similar policies and practices. Sharing effective approaches to consulting students about issues that relate directly to their school experience and to including them in the decision-making processes is a further challenge. Student councils have an important role in this, but it is vital that membership includes boys and those from working class backgrounds.*

### 3. Teaching and learning

The study captured students’ views on the type of teaching approaches that helped them to learn. These are presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: What teaching techniques help students to learn? (% very helpful)



As in the first and second year findings, students reported that they learned best when teachers explained things clearly, had a clear grasp of their subject, made learning fun and encouraged students to express their opinion in class. It is notable that a didactic form of teaching, or 'teaching from the book', was viewed by students as less helpful in their learning.

It's hard to concentrate because all we do is read from the book... There's no fun stuff (Student, co-ed school).

Keeping student interest in and focus on the learning process was helped by using a variety of teaching methods such as the use of video and audio resources, group-work and class discussions. Students reported that such methods were used less frequently by teachers in third year.

A bit of everything like, if we did a bit of like tape work, and then a bit of writing, not the same stuff every day, some teachers do the same stuff every day and it just gets boring (Student, girls' school, mixed ability).

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 were just like what time is it, let's just get out of here because it's so boring. (Student, girls' school, mixed ability).

Importantly, being asked, and being able to ask questions in class was seen by students as helpful. However, students reported difficulty in approaching some teachers when they did not understand something, finding it easier to turn to friends whose answers were less complicated. In fact, a quarter of students reported that they were afraid to tell teachers if they did not understand something in class, fearing a negative response. Some students preferred to go as a group to ask the teacher for help; others preferred to get help from their friends.

Pace of instruction emerged as an issue for third year students. Overall, less than half of students felt that the pace was about right. Over a quarter of students felt that the teachers go too slowly while over a third felt that teachers go too quickly in class. Those in mixed-ability settings or in middle streams were happiest with the pace of lessons. Of particular interest is that a majority of students in *lower stream classes* felt that the pace of lessons was too *slow*.

For most students, third year was characterised by an increase in schoolwork and homework. Students reported that they experienced greater pressure as increasing demands were being made on them to complete their courses and to revise first and second year work. Perceptions of pressure of schoolwork were, however, related to students' social background, gender, ability level and the class group in which they were placed. Finding schoolwork harder and spending more time on homework was more common among girls, those from professional backgrounds, and those in mixed ability and higher stream classes. Conversely, boys, those from working-class backgrounds, students with lower initial reading and maths scores, and those in middle or lower stream classes were more likely to report that schoolwork and homework were about the same or even less demanding than in second year.

Some students found homework helpful in that it helped them assess their own progress and become more independent as learners. Others focused more on 'getting their homework done' and did not seem to benefit much. Over 50% of students felt that they got too much homework, leaving them with less time to study their course.

### 3.1 Commentary

*The characteristics of good teaching are consistent across the three years of the study. Providing a clear explanation of subject matter, using varied approaches, and fostering a supportive classroom environment in which students feel comfortable about asking questions are keys to effective teaching and learning. Teaching 'from the text' according to the students, does not maintain their interest and, together with the absence of positive feedback in the classroom, may contribute to students' disengagement from the learning process.*

*Of note in this set of findings are the student perceptions of the pace of instruction. Getting pacing right is a complex task in all educational settings and is particularly challenging when there is a wide range of ability in a group of learners. The research asked students in mixed ability, higher stream, lower stream and middle stream classes about pace. It is of concern that less than half of the students in any of these groups thought that the pace was just right for them, with students in the higher or lower streams having the greatest difficulty.*

*The challenge to 'stretch' is well illustrated here—with almost 25% of those in the higher streams of streamed settings reporting the pace as too slow. Pace of instruction is a significant issue, as students who feel that the class is progressing too slowly are not being challenged and may become bored or disengaged. Interestingly, the findings of the PISA study also pointed to this problem within Irish education.*

*The comments about pace of learning by lower stream students in streamed schools are particularly noteworthy. The rationale presented by many schools for opting for a streamed approach is to better match the learning needs of 'less able' students. As this is the group most likely to report too slow a pace, it is questionable whether this approach is serving its purpose.*

### 3.2 School support for students

As in first and second year, the Year Head/Class Tutor system provided general support for students. Most schools reported greater involvement of the guidance counsellor to provide educational guidance for students and to assist them in choosing senior cycle options. In addition, some case study schools, predominantly those with a working-class intake, provided specific supports for some groups of students. These measures included formal learning support, homework clubs, home school community liaison, and the Junior Certificate School Programme. The main focus of these supports was to assist the educational participation of disadvantaged students.

While students relied on parents and family members for help with homework and study throughout junior cycle, third year students looked increasingly to the school for support. This ranged from occasional extra help from teachers outside regular class—a quarter of students received this form of assistance, to formal learning support—one fifth of third year students were receiving help from learning support or resource teachers on an individual basis or in small groups. A majority of these students had low initial reading and maths scores. Interestingly, three-quarters of students who received formal learning support in first year were still getting such help in third year. In fact there was an overall *increase* in the proportion of students receiving learning support in third year compared with first year.

Many case study schools had also identified an additional group of third year students for learning support who had not received support in first year. Boys from working-class backgrounds, those in middle or lower streams in streamed schools were disproportionately represented among this new group, as were students from a Traveller background and international students.

While taking grinds was not the norm in any case study school, over a quarter of third year students in the survey had done so, two-thirds of these in mathematics. Parents and peers were seen to have a significant influence on whether students took grinds or not. Students in mixed or middle-class schools were three times as likely to take grinds as students in working-class schools, and students with middle initial reading and maths scores were more likely to take grinds than those in the upper and lower range of ability. Students had mixed views on the value of grinds—many feeling that they benefited from the extra time and individualised help with a subject—others felt that they were an unnecessary expense and not required if they worked in class.

### 3.3 Commentary

*The emergence of this new group of students needing learning support in third year is of note. Why were these students not identified at an earlier stage in junior cycle, when intervention was more likely to be effective? Two reasons present themselves. One may be that the challenge for teachers to differentiate for a wide range of ability increases as a single examination approaches This may lead them to direct more students to learning support. The second reason may relate to increased resources for learning support becoming available as the cohort moved through junior cycle. Given that these students are predominantly boys in lower streams, from a working class or Traveller background, who are more likely to have disengaged from learning, it is also a possibility that learning support is seen by some schools as a way of getting them back on track.*

*That the guidance counsellor is a key support person in third year is not unexpected. There is obviously a need for students to receive accurate information about educational and career pathways at this stage in their education (we will see later, however, that parents still have the main role in this). These findings emphasise the importance of educational and career guidance for third year students and the need for*

*adequate resources for schools to ensure that provision. The development by NCCA of a framework for guidance may be of assistance to schools and guidance counsellors in this regard.*

*School sources of information are important for students whose parents are less likely to have access to or familiarity with educational information and networks. The advice and support schools offer these students and their families are more significant than the advice and support offered to other students. Engaging such students and their families, connecting them to school, and making connections between the school and communities are ongoing challenges.*

*While the middle-class status of students taking grinds is predictable, the high proportion of students taking grinds at this stage in their education is surprising. The emergence of mathematics as the subject of choice when it comes to grinds is less surprising given the findings of the first and second year of the study regarding attitudes to mathematics. Whether this relates to the perceived inherent difficulty of the subject, or that many students are taking grinds 'because their friends are doing so' is not clear. Either way, it seems that the growing culture of grinds, already evident among Leaving Certificate students, has permeated down to the Junior Certificate, which for most students, is a low-stakes examination.*

## 4. The curriculum

This part of the research gives insights into curriculum provision for students in the third year of junior cycle. On average, students took twelve subjects, ten of which were examination subjects, the same as in second year, but this ranged from a minimum of six to a maximum of fifteen across the case study schools. Weekly time allocated to a selection of subjects is recorded in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Class periods allocated in first and third year compared

Subject	Most frequent allocation: third year	Most frequent allocation: first year
Irish	5	4 or 5
English	5	5
Mathematics	5	5
History	3	2 or 3
Geography	3	2
French	4	3
Science	4	3
Physical Education	2	2

The amount of time allocated to different subjects changed little from second to third year, with the notional ‘core’ subjects being joined by science and French in getting the greatest time allocation. While this table presents the most frequent time allocation, there was variation in the amount of time given to specific subjects in the case study schools. For example, time allocation in French and science ranged from three to five periods depending on the school. However, there was little relationship between *school type* and time allocation to different subjects. The only exception was Irish. Working-class schools allocated less time to the language than other schools, on average, one period less.

Availability of subjects varied *between* class groupings within schools, notably in relation to French. In three of the case study schools students in the lower streams did not take French while the subject was compulsory or optional for higher stream classes.

#### 4.1 Commentary

*At first glance, the junior cycle curriculum may appear overcrowded and inflexible—with schools having little choice in what and how many subjects are taken by students, and how much time is given to each subject. It is apparent from the findings of this research, however, that schools can and do make choices about what subjects they offer, and how many. Some students took 6 subjects, while others took 15. Through*

*timetable allocation they also have considerable control over the relative importance attached to subjects. They can also decide 'who gets what'. School decisions, then, have a strong influence on the nature, quality and breadth of the junior cycle curriculum.*

*It may well be that many students are taking more subjects in junior cycle than they can realistically be expected to master. The more subjects a student takes, the greater the level of pressure that teachers and students experience in trying to 'complete the course'. The quality of student/teacher interaction and the scope for innovative teaching styles can be seriously compromised as a result. The kind of learning in which students are engaged for most of their school time in junior cycle is also of note. Time on the subjects which they enjoy most is considerably less than time they spend on subjects in which they have little interest!*

*While it is important to provide a broad curriculum for students in order to build on their primary experience and prepare them for senior cycle, the excessive breadth of many students' Junior Certificate commitments may be difficult to justify.*

*Two important strands of NCCA at junior cycle are relevant here. Work has been ongoing to rebalance subject syllabuses with the express purpose of reducing course length, removing overlap and ensuring comparable volume in the different subjects to allow teachers to use more engaging approaches to teaching and learning.*

*A second strand has involved providing support for schools in curriculum planning. A resource for schools, developed jointly by NCCA and the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) was published in 2001. Its purpose was to assist schools in reviewing current curriculum arrangements in first year using areas of experience for junior cycle. However the use of the areas of experience in curriculum planning has not gained much currency in schools.*

*It would be useful in this regard to engage with schools to capture existing good practice in junior cycle curriculum provision.*

## 4.2 Attitudes to subjects

Students were also asked about the relative difficulty of subjects, which ones they found interesting and their perception of the usefulness of the subjects they were taking. The following tables are based on the detailed findings of the study.

Table 2: Perceived difficulty of subjects

DIFFICULT	
Most	Least
mathematics science French German Irish business studies history	physical education computers materials technology (wood) art English home economics

Table 3: Level of interest in subjects

INTERESTING	
Most	Least
materials technology (wood) art computers physical education history science	Irish French German mathematics

Table 4: Perceived usefulness of subjects

USEFUL	
Most	Least
business studies mathematics home economics materials technology (wood) computers science English	Irish history geography art

Mathematics, science, Irish, French and German were considered by students to be the most difficult subjects. Subjects with a practical orientation, such as physical education, art, home economics, materials technology (wood) and computers were viewed as being less difficult than other subjects. These subjects were also more likely to be seen as interesting by students.

The findings in relation to mathematics are noteworthy. Almost 60% of third year students found mathematics difficult, less than half said the subject was interesting, but nearly 90% viewed the subject as useful. Students were also more likely to take grinds in mathematics than in other subjects.

Next to mathematics, business studies, home economics, materials technology (wood) and computers were considered most useful, in that order. History is seen as interesting, but more difficult and less useful than other subjects. Science is seen as difficult but interesting. Perceived difficulty is high and interest lowest in languages, including Irish, which is also considered the least useful subject.

### 4.3 Commentary

*As in previous phases of this research, students are expressing marked discontent about the mathematics they encounter in junior cycle. While on the one hand over 80% recognise mathematics as 'useful', a great many apparently don't find maths in junior cycle interesting and find the study of maths very difficult. The contradiction between what students perceive as being important and their response to the actual experience is interesting. 'Useful' does not mean 'easy'. The fundamental questions about what mathematics is taught and how it is taught are brought into sharp focus here. The NCCA's 'Project Maths' initiative appears all the more pertinent in this regard.*

*Students' reported negative perceptions of modern languages are worrying. EU membership, growing prosperity and increased travel has not led to increased interest in these languages. That this is so, raises fundamental questions about language learning in Ireland. It is hoped that the review of languages currently being carried out by NCCA and the parallel development of a languages in education policy by the Department of Education and Science (DES) will serve to address these issues.*

*The reported views of students in the case study schools about Irish are of particular concern. Of importance in meeting these concerns is the recently announced DES policy to place greater emphasis on the ability of students to speak the Irish language with greater competence and confidence by increasing the weighting for the oral component of the examination. However, as the NCCA review of Irish in post-primary education suggested, a more extensive revision of the curriculum may be necessary to address the situation of Irish.*

*The level of interest in subjects with a practical orientation is striking. Subjects like materials technology (wood), art, home economics and physical education are favoured by students for a number of reasons: they are activity-based, involve learning by doing, have more varied learning environments and, in the case of examination subjects, have assessment methods that include a practical dimension. The contribution these subjects can make to student motivation and engagement is considerable. That schools should be encouraged and supported to make these subjects accessible to the majority of their students is beyond question; but the approaches and methodologies associated with these subjects should also be applied across the curriculum, in all subjects and not confined to what have been traditionally viewed as 'vocational subjects'. The importance of assessment in supporting this shift should not be underestimated.*

## 5. Ability grouping

The case study schools have different approaches to how they organise their junior cycle students into class groups. In six of the schools, students are placed in mixed-ability base classes. The other six schools use some form of ability grouping, such as streaming or banding. Streaming involves placing students into ability groups ranked from higher to lower streams. Banding is a looser arrangement which may, for example, involve having two 'higher' and two 'lower' classes.

By third year all six mixed-ability schools were using some form of setting, which involves students being placed in higher and ordinary level classes in particular

subjects, usually the 'core subjects' Irish English and mathematics. It is more flexible than streaming in that it can take account of differing aptitudes and interests of students in different subjects. For example, a student may be in the higher-level English class but be in the ordinary-level Mathematics class. In these schools, subjects other than the 'core subjects' were generally taught in mixed ability groups.

## 5.1 Impact of ability grouping

The research found the different policies and practices on ability grouping adopted by the case study schools had a profound effect on their students' attitudes to school and their level of engagement with learning.

In first year, some schools that streamed did so on the basis of very little difference in ability between students. There was, for example, considerable overlap in English and maths scores across middle and lower streams. So, students became 'fixed' in the stream in which they were first placed, but that initial placement was often on the basis of relatively little evidence. By second year, students in lower streams had developed a more negative attitude to schoolwork, were more likely to misbehave and be given out to by teachers and were more likely to have disengaged from learning and from school life. The research revealed that lower stream students tended to experience more traditional forms of teaching, and were offered a more restricted curriculum, being less likely to have access to active learning methods than their peers. There was also little evidence of movement between streams. Where movement did occur, it was more likely 'down' than 'up'.

These findings, emergent in first and second year, consolidate in third year. Students in lower stream classes were more likely to drift or become disengaged from school. Lower stream students were also more likely to intend to leave school at the end of junior cycle than their peers in mixed ability settings or in middle and higher streams. If they did choose to stay on in school they were less likely to take Transition Year, and were most likely to take the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme.

It is also interesting to note that streaming was most commonly practised in the working class/disadvantaged case study schools.

## 5.2 Student engagement

The longitudinal nature of the research made it possible to clearly identify the characteristics of students who were becoming increasingly engaged with school and with study, and those who were drifting or actively disengaging from school.

The majority of students became increasingly engaged with school and schoolwork over the course of junior cycle. These were, however, more likely than other students to be girls, those in middle-class schools with higher levels of ability, and in mixed-ability or higher stream classes. Some students (mainly those with middle reading and maths scores) who were 'drifting' in second year re-engaged with their schoolwork in third year. These two groups of students had more positive attitudes to school and to teachers. By third year, however, over 25% of students were either drifting or had disengaged from school. These were more likely than other students to be boys from a working-class background, with lower initial reading and maths scores, and in lower streams in streamed schools.

## 5.3 Commentary

*The emergence of different groups of students in third year is no surprise for any teacher working with junior cycle students, or for any principal or guidance counsellor working in post-primary schools. Parents too, can identify in their own children, those who become more engaged with school, and those who seem to be less engaged or even disengaged. The real value of the research findings is in the insights they offer into the reasons for the engagement and disengagement.*

*While schools may believe that streaming enables them to better meet the learning needs of particular students the findings of this study show that students **do not benefit** from the arrangement. Streaming has a polarising effect on students. One group, primarily those in top streams, becomes more engaged with learning and expects success in the exams. It seems that they get a 'better deal' all around. The other group, more frequently students in lower stream classes, becomes progressively more negative about school, 'acts up', gets given out to more by teachers and is drifting or disengaged. What appears to be happening is that students reach the level of achievement, or rather underachievement that is expected of them.*

*As will be seen later in this paper, ability grouping also strongly influences the levels at which students expect to take and do take subjects in the Junior Certificate examination. Predictably, students in lower streams also perform poorly in the Junior Certificate examination. A more surprising finding is that students in mixed ability settings outperform higher stream students in this examination!*

*The implications for schools and for teachers are striking. Streaming is having a negative impact on student engagement and achievement, and schools as part of their ongoing review and planning need to begin to consider how their approach to assigning students to classes is affecting student attitudes and outcomes. Schools which organise mixed ability classes generate greater satisfaction with the pace of instruction, and their students – even their higher ability students – are performing better. But teachers need urgent, comprehensive and sustained support on differentiation in teaching and assessment to ensure that more is expected of more students.*

*There is also a message here for disadvantaged schools. Faced with a wider range of ability than ever before, and the pressures – perceived or otherwise – to deliver a high achieving ‘elite’ within the cohort, schools serving working class or disadvantaged populations in this study chose to stream. Anecdotal evidence is that this is an emerging pattern in schools coping with more diverse populations than before. The DEIS initiative can play an important role in disseminating the findings of this study in participating schools and in supporting those schools in evaluating and reviewing their current practices.*

*The question of whether a system-wide approach to policy on ability grouping should be adopted merits some debate.*

## **6. Subject levels**

Interesting findings also emerge from the third year study regarding the levels at which students take subjects, how these are decided, and how students change levels over time. Most of the schools emphasised that decisions about levels were a matter of

discussion and negotiation between student and teacher. In some schools, however, a different reality emerged.

In streamed schools, for example, the level at which a student took a subject was more or less determined by the stream in which that student was placed. It was generally expected that students in the higher streams would take most, if not all subjects at higher level, while the lower streams were generally expected to take all subjects at ordinary or foundation level. In fact, many students in the lower streams reported that they had not been consulted *at all* about levels.

The fact that they are an A class they take higher levels, you know, and we take it right through to the Mocks. ... If they didn't do well in higher [in the mocks] and if we feel they are capable of better, we keep them at it. We push them; we would push them more than give them the choice to take ordinary (Teacher, boys' school, streamed classes).

They're [lower stream] no way ambitious that way ... so yeah it's mainly foundation, foundation in Irish, English and Maths and then pass in all the other subjects (Teacher, boys' school, streamed classes).

Students responded negatively to being placed into higher or ordinary level classes for the 'core' subjects at an early stage in junior cycle.

I have to say I think that was the stupidest thing they could have ever done, was to decide before you'd even come into the school. I came into the school and I know I wasn't brilliant at Irish but I wasn't terrible and I was put in one of the low pass classes. And I was sitting there and everybody was learning cad is ainm duit and I'm like oh my god this is stupid ... and now ... like I'm like ... sort of not learning it or something (Student girls' school, mixed ability).

Moving up or down between levels in a subject appeared to be more frequent in mixed ability schools, where higher and ordinary level students were in the same class. Generally, however, the trend was to *drop down* levels rather than move up.

Students tended to drop levels in a number of subjects in third year as the Junior Certificate examination approached. Among the 'core' subjects, fall-off from higher level was much more frequent for Irish and mathematics than for English, where numbers taking higher level did not drop significantly. Social class differences also

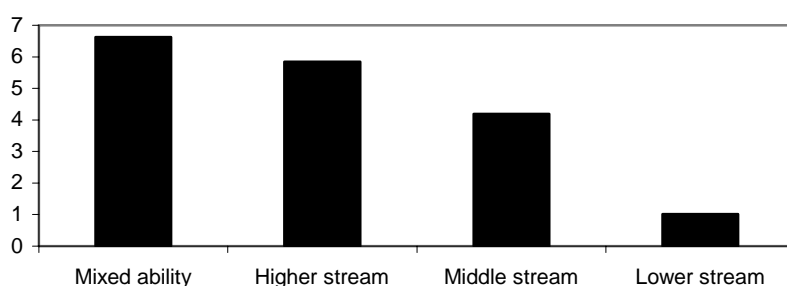
emerged here, with students from a working-class background much more likely to drop levels in these subjects than middle-class students.

Students in the case study schools were asked in January of third year what subjects they expected to take at the different levels (foundation, ordinary or higher level). The research found that students' first year reading and maths ability were a good predictor of higher level subject uptake—those with high scores in first year taking on average over eight subjects and students with lowest scores taking less than three. Reading scores were more important than maths scores in determining level.

However, reading scores of students taking foundation level in English did not differ markedly from those taking ordinary level. Initial maths scores of ordinary and foundation level maths students were similarly overlapping.

Streaming (or lack of it) also had a marked effect on higher level subject take-up, as Figure 2 below indicates. Lower stream classes took few higher level subjects, less than students with similar initial reading and maths scores in the middle streams. Students in higher streams also took fewer higher level subjects and were more likely to drop levels in Irish, English and mathematics than those in mixed ability settings.

Figure 2. Number of higher-level subjects taken by ability group

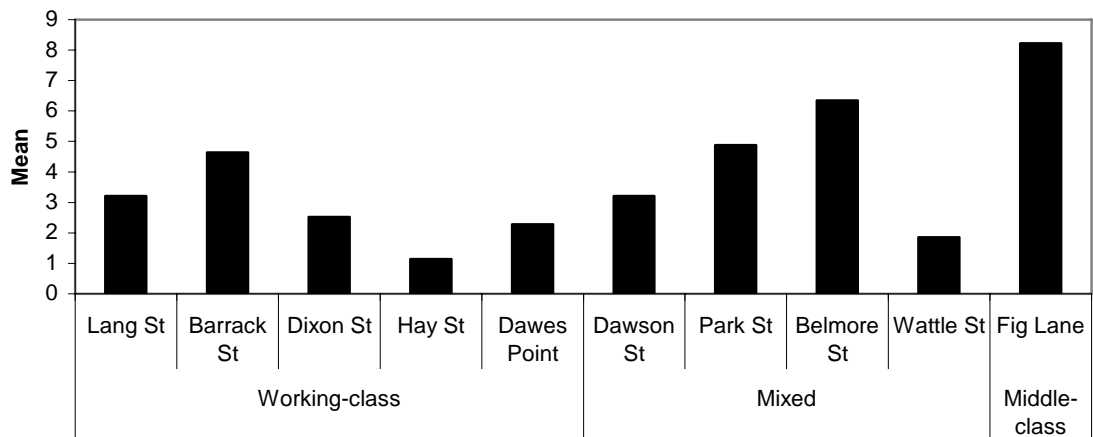


In addition, gender, and particularly social class, influenced subject level take-up, with girls taking a greater number of higher level subjects than boys, and middle-class students taking more than working-class students.

But differences also emerged *between* schools. Figure 3 below shows the different expectations of students with similar initial reading and writing scores across the case

study schools. The study has found evidence of a ‘school effect’ over and above the ability profile of the school.

Figure 3: Number of higher-level subjects taken by school (second lowest reading scores)



The expectations of students in Park Street, for example, who were likely to take five subjects at higher level, differ markedly from students of similar initial literacy level in Wattle Street, who were likely to take only two subjects at Higher level. Both are boys’ schools with mixed intake. Clear differences also emerge between student expectations in Lang Street and Hay Street—both designated disadvantaged vocational schools with a working class social mix.

## 6.1 Commentary

*The negative effect of streaming is again evident in these findings. The close association of streaming with subject levels seems to allow little opportunity for individual students to take subjects at a level that matches their aptitudes and interests. A mixed-ability approach provides this opportunity, and it is reported that students in mixed-ability classes expect to do better overall as a result. The higher ‘drop down’ rate in levels among higher streams is also noteworthy..*

*Of particular concern is the impact on students in lower streams. The limiting effect of having little or no option to take any subject at higher level lowers aspirations, means insufficient challenge and leads, as will be seen later, to lower achievement in the examinations. It is worrying also, that many teachers expect very little of students in the*

*lower streams. Where little is expected of students, they are unlikely to raise their own expectations.*

*While there is undoubtedly a range of possible contributory factors, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there is a 'school effect' operating when it comes to the expectations of students among case study schools of similar intake and social class background. It is arguable that policy and practice regarding access to higher level subjects, teacher encouragement and the school's expectations is leading to underperformance among students and may be impacting their long term educational and career options.*

## 7. The Junior Certificate Examination

Students were interviewed in January of third year about their views on the impending Junior Certificate examination. Almost all of the students reported that it was important for them to do well in the Junior Certificate, although the significance of their achievements in the examination was coloured by their perceptions of its implications for their future. Most students saw it as a practice run for the Leaving Certificate. For them it acted as a helpful indicator of their academic potential, supporting decision-making about subject choice and levels for senior cycle. But there were important differences between schools in this regard. The stakes were higher for students in working-class schools and in lower streams because of the potential of their Junior Certificate examination grades in securing access to employment and apprenticeships.

It gets you prepared for real life like. Because if you drop out of school you'll need your Junior Cert, at least you'll have one bit of education.  
For a job as well.  
Or for a job or something (Student, co-ed school, lower stream/band).

### 7.1 Engagement with study

The researchers asked key staff members and students about the students' levels of preparation for the Junior Certificate examination at the stage at which the mock examinations were being taken (March of the exam year). Teacher responses revealed perceptions of a variety of levels of student engagement with study, ranging from those

who were working very hard to those who were in need of far greater levels of application. In general, girls were seen to be more conscientious and more highly motivated than boys, although some teachers did report high levels of motivation among boys.

In the streamed schools there tended to be a perception among staff that there was a significant gap between the study levels of higher and lower streams. Teachers in some streamed schools saw it as unrealistic to expect lower streams to study.

They'll study if I give them a test tomorrow. ... If I suggested to them that they might ... revise say four sections [over Easter] ... you must be joking, I wouldn't do it because I don't want to put myself in the situation of being an eejit, you know, because I live in a real world, they don't [study] (Teacher, boys' school, streamed classes).

Students' views of their levels of preparedness for the examination also revealed considerable variation. Some reported that the mock examinations helped them to clarify and focus on what needed to be done; others felt unready for the exam when they contemplated the large amount of material needing revision in some subjects. A number felt that they should have been studying throughout the junior cycle rather than, as they saw it, leaving everything to third year.

## 7.2 Preferred assessment methods

Students, responding to questions about their preferences for different assessment methods, were generally more positive about hands-on, practical approaches that involved the production of something tangible, and were less positive about written examinations. They preferred the practical options because they felt that they involved less pressure, allowed more time for completion, and reflected a broader range of skills than written exams. A number of students expressed a preference for continuous assessment over the terminal examination.

## 7.3 Commentary

*The Junior Certificate examination is not a matter of equal importance for all students. In fact, students from working-class backgrounds and those who do not intend to remain on in school after the Junior Certificate are in effect preparing for an*

*examination which has quite a different meaning than for those for whom the exam is a practice run for the Leaving Certificate. That said, simply thinking that the Junior Certificate is important does not guarantee success, nor does it promote a positive academic self-image.*

*Once again, students show preferences for the practical, the hands-on, in relation to how assessment might be carried out. Despite the logistical difficulties implied in their preferences it is important that the NCCA course committees engaged in the syllabus re-balancing as part of the review of junior cycle continue to identify potential for a wider range of possibilities in summative assessment.*

*It is worrying to find teachers in different streamed schools echoing each other's low expectations of their students in the lower streams, apparently without reflection on the negative impact of streaming itself. This is especially significant given that the research showed strong links between the expectations of parents, teachers and students with the actual grades achieved by students in the examination.*

#### 7.4 Junior Certificate examination performance

The study examined the student and school factors that influence performance in the Junior Certificate examination and identified characteristics, experiences and processes which help to promote student achievement. The research focused on the aggregate performance of students rather than the performances of students or schools on a subject by subject basis, and to this end it used the following measure of aggregate performance. Allocating a points rating from 10 for an A grade on a Higher Level paper down to 1 for a D grade on a Foundation Level paper, a Junior Certificate Grade Point Average (JCGPAV) was achieved for each student by dividing the total number of points scored by the number of subjects taken.

Table 5: How an individual JCGPAV score was calculated.

Higher Level Grades	Ordinary Level Grades	Foundation Level Grades	Total Points	No. of subjects	JCGPAV
4 A (40)	4 B (24)	2 A (8)	72	10	7.2
5 B (45)	5 C (25)	0	70	10	7
0	7 D (28)	3 B (9)	37	10	3.7

Initial analysis of exam performance by reference to this score identified a number of trends associated with student achievement. Girls were found to outperform boys and students from professional backgrounds achieved significantly higher grades than those from working-class and non-employed groups. Students with high initial reading and maths scores on entry to post-primary school outperformed those with lower scores—this factor was found to be one of the strongest predictors of examination success.

As reported earlier in the commentary, school, student and parental expectations contributed to exam success. Students who expected to do well achieved high grades, as did students who aspired to go on to higher education. Students who were highly engaged with schoolwork outperformed students with more negative attitudes who were more likely to be drifting or disengaging from learning and school.

The study was primarily concerned, however, with the *progress* students made over junior cycle, given their differing starting-points. The results were analysed in such a way that differences between schools and between different groups of students could be explored. The research concluded that some of the initial variation between schools was due to differences in their intake of students—that is the gender mix, class-background and initial reading scores of the student cohort. But, the schools were still found to differ in the average grades attained by their students, even controlling for gender, social class and initial ability. In other words, some schools were having a more positive impact on student achievement in the examination than others.

## 7.5 Commentary

*As might be expected, examination performance is strongly structured by social class background, and social class background is associated with variation in literacy and numeracy scores. Students from middle-class backgrounds do better academically in part because they come to post-primary school with higher performance levels. The much-reported gender differences in achievement are also found.*

*Although the objective of the study was not to focus on the scale of between-school differences in exam performance, a number of key findings point to a significant conclusion in this regard. The case-study schools are found to differ in average grades,*

*even controlling for initial ability, gender and social class. In other words, schools make a net difference to how students fare academically. Furthermore, the class group to which students are allocated in first year has a significant effect on their academic achievement. Students in lower stream classes achieve more than two grade points per subject less than those allocated to mixed ability base classes, an effect which is larger than the social class differential. Thus, the research indicates a strong correlation between examination performance and decisions made at school level about how instruction is organised, especially about the allocation of students to class groups. Schools might not be in a position to exercise control over the prior achievement levels of their intake of students, or of their social class, but the findings of this research to the fact that a decision subsequently to allocate that intake to ability-based streams in an attempt to support their progress in learning is, at best, misguided and unhelpful.*

*In a context of an increasingly diverse school-going population and an increased emphasis on assessment of literacy and numeracy in primary schools it is a matter of some urgency that the best uses be made of the information to which schools will have access and that schools and teachers are supported in a pedagogy that promotes a positive academic self-image for all learners.*

## 8. Senior cycle

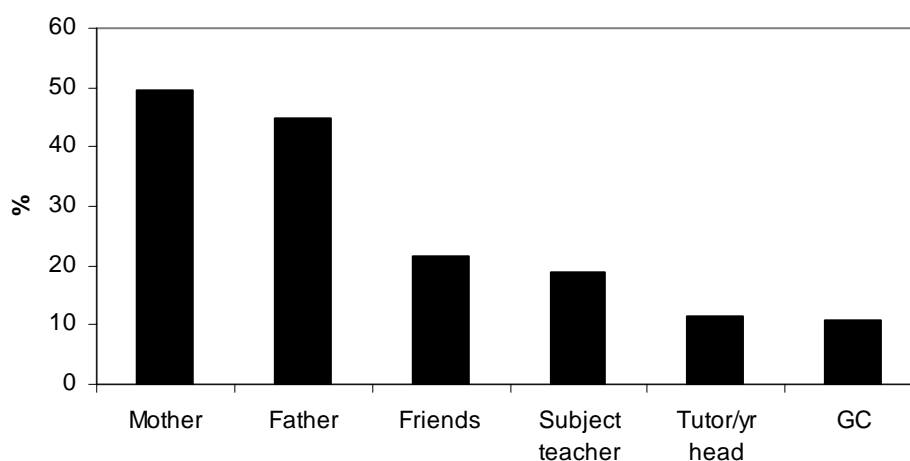
The research provides an insight into the processes involved in the transition from junior cycle to senior cycle. The researchers looked at third year students' aspirations and expectations regarding senior cycle and their early experiences of the senior cycle programmes they had taken (TY, LCE, LCA, LCVP). The study also looked at the availability of senior cycle programmes within the case study schools and the ways in which students were informed about and selected these programmes.

It should be noted that this phase of the research took place in January/February 2006, six months after they had entered transition year or fifth year, relatively early in the senior cycle experience.

## 8.1 Sources of information

As with subject choices and levels in junior cycle, students depended more on family and friends than on information provided by the school in making decisions about what senior cycle programme they would take (where more than one programme was offered). Between 45% and 50% of students considered their parents very important, while over a third reported their friends were very important in this regard (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 5: Sources of advice in senior cycle choices (% very important)



(GC = Guidance counsellor)

School-based sources of information, such as guidance counsellors, class tutors/year heads and subject teachers, were more likely to be considered very important by students from working-class backgrounds, and by international students. The study noted that boys were less likely to seek advice from *either* informal or formal sources. As mentioned earlier, the guidance counsellor was seen to have a potentially key role to play in providing career and educational guidance to students.

While it should be noted that findings were based on research carried out in January and March of third year, the study found that 85% of third year students felt that they

would like to know more about senior cycle options and nearly half felt that they had insufficient information to help them decide what to do. Students who had more contact with the guidance counsellor were more likely to be satisfied with the information they had received.

### 8.3 Senior cycle programmes

Table 6 below shows the senior cycle programmes offered in each of the case study schools. In the sections that follow, the key findings in relation to each programme are summarised. These relate to issues of provision, of access to the programmes, as well as students' views of the programmes they had taken.

Table 6: Breakdown of senior cycle programmes offered by the case study schools

School	TY	LCE	LCA	LCVP	Size	Intake	Gender
Dawson St.		√	√	√	medium	w-class	co-ed
Barrack St.	√	√			Small	w-class	Girls
Dixon St.		√	√		Large	w-class	co-ed
Park St.		√		√	Large	Mixed	Boys
Hay St.				√	Small	w-class	co-ed
Fig Lane	√	√		√	Large	m-class	co-ed
Lang St.	√*	√	√	√	Small	w-class	Boys
Dawes Point		√		√	Small	w-class	Boys
Belmore St.	√	√	√	√	Large	Mixed	Girls
Wattle St.	√*	√		√	Small	Mixed	Boys
Argyle St.	√	√	√	√	Large	Mixed	co-ed
Harris St.	√*	√			large	m-class	Girls

TY= Transition Year (\*TY compulsory)

LCE= Leaving Certificate Established

LCA= Leaving Certificate Applied

LCVP= Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

In all, 43% of students in the case study schools took Transition Year, 32% took the Leaving Certificate Established, 20% took the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and 5% took Leaving Certificate Applied.

#### 8.4 Transition Year (TY)

TY is offered in 7 of the 12 schools. The programme is *optional* in four of these schools. It is *compulsory* in three, of which one, Harris Street, is a large girls' school and the other two, small boys' schools. As the data shows, middle-class schools and those with a mixed intake were more likely to offer TY than working-class schools.

In schools where TY is optional, places were generally offered to any student who wished to take the programme. However, there is some evidence of students with a history of misbehaviour being 'discouraged' from taking the programme. It is of interest that only two of the working-class schools in the study offered transition year, although some reported offering TY in the past, but discontinuing it due to lack of demand from students and parents.

Interesting findings also emerged in relation to schools that made transition year compulsory. Two were small schools, no doubt reflecting the resource implications of running more than one programme simultaneously. In one school, TY was compulsory because in its view, all students should benefit from the programme (for example, in terms of gaining maturity). In another school, TY was compulsory for all students not taking Leaving Certificate Applied.

It is notable that students in lower streams were more likely to say they did not intend to take TY whereas those aspiring to go on to a degree were more likely to express their intention to take TY. In addition, girls were more likely to opt for TY than boys, who preferred to go directly into an LC programme.

While teachers were generally positive about TY, in that it helped students to mature and develop, they noted that some benefited more than others.

Students however were divided on their views of transition year. Some students found the programme varied, interesting and useful. Transition year for these students was seen as an opportunity to do things not possible in other years and a chance to sample Leaving Certificate subjects before having to make a choice. These students reported that the programme was giving them a growing sense of independence and maturity, that the reduction in homework represented a break after the pressure of the Junior Certificate and that project work was a more interesting approach to study. Work experience was valued as good preparation for life after school.

Students who were negative about TY offered a range of views. Some students felt that they were overburdened by the amount of projects they had to do, while others reported that they were not doing much in transition year and feared a loss of study habits. Students felt that more could be done to make subjects, particularly the 'core' subjects, more interesting. Some negative views on work experience emerged—students reporting that they felt exploited and not allowed to do real work. The cost of participation in transition year was also raised as an issue by students.

## 8.5 Leaving Certificate Established (LCE)

The Leaving Certificate Established was offered to students in all but one school, where LCVP was compulsory. However, the research found that students did not regard LCE as a programme but saw it as 'the norm'.

Students were generally positive about the LCE. They liked the subjects they were studying, enjoyed the coursework and reported improved relationships with their teachers. Of particular note was that students liked the opportunity to 'specialise' and saw the subjects they had chosen as being relevant to their future career plans.

On a more negative note, students reported increased work demands, pressure from teachers and, in some cases, a large gap in the level of difficulty between junior cycle and senior cycle. Also, some LCE students reported that they had not been allowed to take the subjects (or programme) of their choice.

## 8.6 Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)

The most striking finding about LCVP is that it was rarely seen as a programme by staff or students in the case study schools. Moreover, in January and March of third year few students were aware of the existence of LCVP as a senior cycle option.

In the main, LCVP was synonymous with the Link Modules which were sometimes taken in addition to a student's seven subjects or instead of a subject (six+link modules). These different arrangements led to timetabling differences—some schools timetabling the link modules against non-exam subjects and, in one case, during lunchtime.

Selection arrangements for LCVP in some schools contributed to the anonymity of the programme. In some schools, students were simply placed in the programme if they had the right combination of subjects. In others, students first selected their LC subjects and were offered the programme if they had the right subject combination.

## 8.7 Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)

The research explored the reasons why schools did or did not offer LCA, the characteristics of students who took the programme, how they were recruited or selected, and their initial perceptions of the programme.

Five of the schools in the study offered LCA. Of these, three had a working-class and two a mixed intake. Schools offering the programme did so to improve student retention and to meet the needs of those who were likely to struggle with the academic demands of the LCE. Reasons why schools did not offer LCA included not having enough students suited to the programme, or having insufficient resources to run LCA parallel to other senior cycle options. Some schools did not provide LCA because they were concerned that the programme would have a negative effect on the image of the school.

Students in the LCA cohort were seen to have many characteristics in common. They were predominantly from working-class backgrounds, had lower reading scores than other students and were likely to have been in the lower streams in streamed schools. They were also more likely to be boys than girls and many had a history of

misbehaviour in junior cycle. 60% of the LCA cohort had received learning support in third year.

'Recruiting' students to LCA was found to be a complex issue. In some schools, students were taken aside and encouraged by key personnel to opt for LCA; in other schools, only students in the lower streams had access to LCA. In addition, some schools discouraged students from taking LCA if they considered they were capable of doing well in LCE or LCVP.

Most LCA students considered senior cycle as easier than junior cycle, and some reported a good deal of repetition of material covered in junior cycle. It is interesting to note however, that when asked in third year, one third of LCA students reported having aspirations of continuing to third level.

Compulsion was seen to have a negative effect on LCA students' attitudes to school. Although LCA students had the most negative attitude to school when in third year, they were most positive among senior cycle students about their interaction with teachers when they had taken the programme.

## 8.8 Commentary

*The NCCA's review of senior cycle education and subsequent senior cycle developments provide a relevant and useful lens through which to consider the findings emerging from the ESRI research.*

*In relation to the Transition Year, concern was expressed about its continued existence only as a stand-alone programme and suggested that, in the interest of improving access to the benefits of Transition Year for all students, it should be possible to combine units of study with traditional Leaving Certificate subjects in a more flexible arrangement. The question of access was considered critical as it was clear even at that time that Transition Year wasn't a real option for many students (particularly boys) from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In other words, the additional year of investment, and the proven benefits that accrued were further advantaging those who were already advantaged.*

*Proposals for the development of senior cycle also recommended the eventual discontinuation of the LCVP on the basis that, for many schools, the Link Modules had become the 'programme'. The success and the value of the Link Modules in Enterprise and Preparation for the World of Work in schools was recognised and underscored. However, it was suggested that the modules be converted into a new curriculum component called short courses which, on an optional basis, could be made available to all students. More generally, greater attention could be given to devising programmes of study with a particular career or vocational orientation that would meet the needs of schools that had been successful in relating the Link Modules to the broader vocational subject groupings of the LCVP.*

*When it came to the Leaving Certificate Applied, the proposals for the development of senior cycle recognised the many successes of the programme in areas such as the retention of students who would otherwise have left school, the introduction of innovative approaches to assessment, and the fostering of new learning environments, learning relationships, learning supports and ways of managing the learning of students. Most importantly, many students who have participated in the Leaving Certificate Applied have enjoyed the educational experience and feel the benefit of it in their private, social, learning and working lives. However, the review expressed deep and abiding concern with the degree to which participation in the programme was largely confined to particular groups of students and particular schools. The status of the programme in the Irish education system was considered a cause for concern to the extent that the review expressed some regret at the original decision to ring-fence participation in the programme rather than allow students to combine some LCA courses with some Leaving Certificate subjects.*

*The early findings of the ESRI research on senior cycle adds to the continuing discussion on the future of the senior cycle programmes. At face value they would seem to be add some weight to the current direction of the senior cycle review and developments.*

*Transition year is very successful in many schools, particularly where it is optional, well planned, includes 'interesting' and 'different' activities and involves a range of teaching approaches and learning opportunities. However, it continues largely to be the choice*

*and preserve of middle class 'engaged' students, with disproportionate participation of girls over boys. Some indications in the research of hidden policies in the exclusion of less engaged 'difficult' boys is cause for concern as is evidence from students that some of the barriers to participation in the Transition Year include how much it costs and the fear that it may be a wasted year.*

*LCVP, while successful in terms of some of its constituent elements, particularly the Link Modules is also invisible to many students who, accurately, see most of their study on the programme as related to Leaving Certificate subjects and who probably wish to see themselves as participating primarily in the high status, mainstream Leaving Certificate.*

*The Leaving Certificate Applied continues, as an educational programme, to be very successful with the quite specific cohort of students who participate in it, namely students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, students in predominantly working-class schools, students who are likely to be less-engaged and present with behavioural difficulties, students who are more likely to be boys than girls. These are the students who are increasingly tracked into the Leaving Certificate Applied.*

*As the review of senior cycle education suggested there is much of educational value in how the Leaving Certificate Applied transacts in schools that could usefully transfer to other senior cycle programmes. It is a successful educational programme. Current parallel research by the ESRI, commissioned by the NCCA, into what happens when graduates of the Leaving Certificate Applied proceed to the world of work and further education will be important in viewing the ultimate degree of success being achieved by the programme and by the education system for this group of students.*

*But its success as an educational programme has not resulted in its improved status within the Irish education system as a whole. It is frequently, colloquially viewed as an inferior version of the Leaving Certificate. Some schools actively avoid offering the programme out of fear that it would damage the status and reputation of the school in an increasingly marketised education system. In these cases, provision of and selection for LCA has as much to do with the school's self-image as with the appropriateness of the education programmes offered to students.*

*Meanwhile, the majority of students participating in the study are in the early stages of study on the Leaving Certificate (Established) and, while expressing some concern with increased level of difficulty in some subjects, are happy to be part of a high-status programme that they recognise will be very important to their future lives.*

*In summary, the initial findings of the research as it moves into the senior cycle educational experience of students would seem, broadly, to add a measure of support to the general thrust of the senior cycle developments, particularly the emphasis on introducing a broader range of curriculum components (subjects, short courses and transition units) that could be used more flexibly than at present in programmes of study that can all be called and are understood as part of the Leaving Certificate. The emphasis on the developments on more varied approaches to assessment, the embedding of key skills and the fostering of learning management approaches for all students would also seem to be supported by the students' perceptions of what they consider to be interesting, motivating educational experiences.*

*However, the overriding value at this point of the insights gained into senior cycle through the research relate less to the senior cycle itself than to the relationship between senior and junior cycle. The research concretises the relationship between the junior and senior cycles of education in schools in very revealing terms. Above all, it clarifies that many of the choices and possibilities that appear to be available to students entering senior cycle have, in fact, been decided upon and pre-determined much earlier by the nature of the education system and by the actions of schools. Unfortunately, it also clarifies that in real terms this means that the post-primary educational experience proves inclusive for some but much less inclusive of others.*

## 9. Conclusions

*In considering the findings as a whole, it is useful to consider a number of different sites or locations within the broader landscape of post-primary education presented by the research.*

*The first of these locations is at the site of interaction between the teacher and the student. The findings about what students consider to be good teaching are supported by the earlier research, and by other similar studies. Equally, the importance of good teacher-student relationships in generating a positive school climate has emerged in other research, both in Ireland and elsewhere. That most students have positive relationships with teachers, and schools make concerted efforts to develop positive supportive climates is good news.*

*As discussed in the summary and commentary above, the issues of pace, feedback and an enquiring classroom atmosphere where students feel that their questions are welcome emerge as significant in the study, and particular challenges for the Irish system. Responses to such challenges appear relatively straightforward – comprehensive professional development for teachers on how to address these particularly sophisticated aspects of pedagogical practice presents as a system-wide need. The role of the NCCA in this site is potentially significant.*

*The challenges emerging in the other two sites call for concerted debate – responses are far from straightforward, and action on them will not be short-term.*

*The second location is the intersection between different groups of students and the within-school processes that assign them to particular groups, and in so doing assign them labels and expectations that the groups then proceed to match and fulfil. Schooling has never been a ‘neutral’ process. Students and their families and communities bring different expectations to the classroom and school; the relationship between social and economic disadvantage and a student achievement gap is an enduring one in most developed education systems. What this study shows is that some school processes are helping to close that gap, while other process lead to the same gaps, or in some cases to an even wider one. Given such a finding, it might appear that the response is straightforward; end those practices and processes that*

*disadvantage some groups of students, and institutionalise those that promote the achievement of all.*

*Even the briefest consideration of the third location on the education landscape mapped by these findings will show however, that such an apparently straightforward action is far from simple, would be highly contested, and may ultimately be impossible to achieve.*

*The third location is the highly complex interaction between schooling and society. To date, the experiences of disadvantaged groups, those who do not achieve well at school or who leave school early have been the subject of at least three decades of reflection and research, and at least two decades of intervention and investment in an attempt to close that achievement gap. Some positive results have been achieved; but as the end of the first decade of the 21st century approaches serious challenges and gaps remain and, as the school-going population becomes more diverse, new gaps begin to emerge.*

*International research and debate has recently begun to focus less on those who do not appear to benefit from education and schooling, and increasingly on those groups who do. While it was not the intention of this study to research this group, the findings shed light on who they are, and on some of the reasons why they continue to make the most of school, and school continues to do the most for them. High expectations, particular kinds of curriculum and examinations, particular kinds of pedagogy, positive relationships with teachers – all of these contribute to the benefits middle class students draw from their schooling. Streaming, and its negative consequences on the outcomes of junior cycle for working class students, adds further to this middle class advantage. Transition Year emerges from this study, as it has done in earlier research, as a high quality programme, the benefits of which accrue to middle class students more than any other group.*

*Changing some of these practices – in the case of streaming, or changing the orientation of others – the kinds of curriculum and examinations for example, may redress the balance in favour of working class students.*

*A further issue that arises at this intersection between schooling and society is the set of expectations that society has of this stage of education. The study establishes that pathways in senior cycle are determined by the experience of junior cycle. The question arises as to whether junior cycle should be a preparation for Leaving Certificate, or whether it has an intrinsic purpose associated with the age and stage of development of its students? In many ways, studying for a Junior Certificate looks the same as studying for the Leaving Certificate – a collection of discrete subjects, at different levels, with little or no relationship between them, assessed by means of a largely centralised, terminal examination. Is this desirable? Should the experience of 13 year olds be shaped to such an extent by the expectations we have of 18 year olds? Or should our expectations of 13 year olds relate more to their needs as learners and young people and to the outcomes of junior cycle education as set out at the time of the development of the junior certificate and reiterated in the review initiated in the late nineties, namely:*

- *competence in literacy, numeracy and spoken language skills which will allow them to participate as young adults in society*
- *experience in various domains of activity - artistic, intellectual, scientific, physical and practical*
- *formative experience in moral, religious and spiritual education*
- *knowledge and supportive guidance in matters of personal health, sexual awareness and relationships*
- *competence and understanding in practical skills, including computer literacy and information technology*
- *knowledge and appreciation of their social, cultural and physical heritage and environment*
- *understanding and appreciation of the central concepts of citizenship*
- *understanding and appreciation of the value of thinking and learning and a positive attitude towards schooling and the opportunities it offers*

*Do the student voices captured in this study speak of these outcomes, and of progress towards them? Or do they speak of subjects, levels, and examinations? Should schools be given greater autonomy in designing pathways to these outcomes for their students? Should assessment – including assessment in the Junior Certificate examination – be more directly linked to these outcomes? These issues were debated at the time of the development of the junior certificate programme in the eighties. They*

*were revisited in the review of junior cycle in the nineties. The issues remain, and debate continues.*

*In an Irish context, this research is unprecedented. This is the first time that the experiences of young people as they go through the junior cycle have been captured and analysed in such detail. The findings provide incontrovertible evidence that as contestation on the nature of junior cycle, and the Junior Certificate examination continue, the consequences of the current system crystallise.*

*Ends*

