

CHARACTERISTICS OF EARLY
SCHOOL LEAVERS: RESULTS OF THE
RESEARCH STRAND OF THE 8- TO 15-
YEAR OLD EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS
INITIATIVE

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1. Introduction

This chapter provides a brief description of the aims of the study described in this report, and the methods used to achieve those aims. It outlines why early school leaving is a problem, the characteristics of early school leavers, and how potential early school leavers might be identified.

Aims of the Research

In November 1998 the Department of Education and Science commissioned the Educational Research Centre to conduct a study on early school leavers, as part of the 8- to 15-Year Old Early School Leavers Initiative. The Department had two main requirements:

- the identification of characteristics which contribute to early school leaving among disadvantaged primary and post-primary school pupils;
- the development of a pupil tracking template for use in schools, which can use indicators identified in the research phase in delineating preventative and support action in schools and in communities.

This report primarily deals with the first requirement, but the design of the research and the interpretation of the findings are influenced by the second requirement.

Research Approach

Ideally, research identifying antecedents of early school leaving should be longitudinal, that is, pupils should be selected, interviewed and assessed at an early stage in their educational careers, then tracked until after they leave school. In this way, it would be possible to state if differences between early school leavers and their classmates who remained in school preceded or followed dropout. However, one of the Department of Education and Science requirements was that the research be completed in 18 months, which ruled out a longitudinal study. Therefore, a retrospective approach was adopted. A sample of 3rd class pupils from 1990/91 was tracked, from which early school leavers were identified and a number interviewed. A sample of the early school leavers' classmates who had not dropped out was also interviewed, making it possible to compare the two groups and analyse factors associated with dropout.

The approach adopted relied heavily on retrospective reporting (which is frequently contaminated by other factors). In an effort to minimise bias in retrospective accounts, schools attended by early school leavers were contacted and asked to supply

information (about attendance, academic performance, and suspensions or expulsions) on identified early school leavers. Information was also gathered about the schools attended by the early school leavers, and the communities in which the schools were located. As the early school leavers had left school relatively recently, the study has the advantage of providing a fairly up-to-date picture of early school leavers and their reasons for leaving school.

Is Early School Leaving a Problem?

The percentage of Irish people completing post-primary school has increased significantly since free post-primary education was introduced in 1968, and the minimum school leaving age was raised to 15 years in 1972. For example, in 1964 only 51.5% of 15-year olds were in full-time education (Investment in Education, 1965). By 1981 the percentage had increased to 87, and has remained at over 95 for most of the 1990s. Over 80% of Irish students now sit the Leaving Certificate examination, in marked contrast to 1964, when approximately one third of pupils did not even transfer to post-primary school.

However, a small percentage of young people still drop out of school every year, often before they reach the minimum school-leaving age. These young people are inadequately equipped to face many of the challenges of adult life. Consequently, much effort has been directed at identifying potential early school leavers and developing preventative programmes. This section defines what is meant by ‘early school leaver’, outlines the extent of early school leaving in Ireland, and explains why it is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Defining Early School Leaving

In order to identify either potential and actual early school leavers, early school leaving itself must first be defined. If it is taken to refer to anyone who leaves school without completing Senior Cycle in post-primary school, then early school leavers can be grouped into four main categories:

1. those who do not complete primary schooling;
2. those who complete primary schooling but do not transfer to a post-primary school;
3. those who attend Junior Cycle courses in a post-primary school but who leave without taking the Junior Certificate Examination;
4. those who leave full-time formal education after taking the Junior Certificate Examination.

For the purposes of this research however, focus will be directed at those in the first three categories – those who leave the formal education system without *any* qualifications. Therefore, the definition of early school leaving adopted by the National Youth Federation (1998) will be used: “the voluntary or involuntary decision to leave school without undertaking Junior Cycle examinations and/or prior to the legal minimum age” (p.3).

The Extent of Early School Leaving

Unlike post-primary schools, primary schools only return ‘block’ data to the Department of Education and Science. Thus, while the Department has data on the *number* of pupils in each primary school in the country, and the total number of pupils enrolled in primary schools, no data are returned on *individual* pupils. It is not currently possible to track individual primary pupil movements at national level. As a result, individuals who drop out, and indeed, numbers who drop out during primary school or who fail to transfer to post-primary school cannot be accurately identified on a national basis. However, estimates would suggest that approximately 900-1,000 pupils annually do not progress to post-primary school (National Economic and Social Forum, 1997).

An examination of those who enrol in post-primary school reveals that, during 1996/97, 3.5% of students (equivalent to 2,500 students, of whom 1,600 were males and 900 were females) left without taking any formal examination (McCoy, Doyle & Williams, 1999). Thus, when added to those who do not transfer to post-primary school, approximately 3,500 young people leave school *each year* without taking any formal examination.

The percentage of those leaving school each year without any qualification is very similar to the rate (3.6%) found in Northern Ireland (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2000). American research indicates a status dropout rate¹ of 4.8% for 16 and 17 year olds in 1997 (none or few of whom would be expected to have graduated) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999). However, two factors make American data not directly comparable to Irish data. Firstly, school attendance is compulsory until 16 in America, whereas it is compulsory only until 15 in Ireland. Secondly, those who leave Irish schools with no qualifications are typically younger than 16 or 17. Therefore, it is likely that Irish dropout rates among those aged 16 or less are at least as high as in other countries such as America and Northern Ireland.

¹ A status dropout rate refers to the proportion of the total population of a given age who are not currently enrolled and who have not completed a specified level of schooling (in this case, graduated from high school).

The Consequences of Early School Leaving

Much of the research on the consequences of early school leaving tends to focus on the poorer employment prospects of those without qualifications. While such prospects are significant (and are discussed below), there are other consequences associated with early school leaving which merit attention.

Employment, Economic Activity and Poverty

The economic consequences of early school leaving are significant and well-established. Early school leavers have poorer employment opportunities, higher rates of unemployment, lower earning potential and an increased likelihood of living in poverty.

Of those who left school during 1996/97, the proportion of early school leavers who were unemployed one year later was more than twice that of school leavers who had taken the Junior Certificate examination, and between eight and eleven times that of Senior Cycle completers (McCoy et al., 1999). The longer-term employment prospects are also poor. Those with no qualifications formed 45.5% of those aged 15 to 24 who were unemployed, and 31.6% of those aged 25 to 34 (OECD, 1997).

The average lifetime earnings of an early school leaver are considerably lower than those of school leavers with qualifications. A typical 1993 high school dropout in America will earn \$212,000 less than high school graduates over a lifetime (Schwartz, 1995). Part of the reason for the relatively low lifetime earnings may be because early school leavers tend to be employed in unstable, dead-end jobs, and to change jobs more often than school leavers with qualifications (Doran & Quilty, 1998; McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci & Davis, 1992). Not only are dropouts likely to earn less than are those with qualifications, but they are also more likely to be classified as living below the poverty line. "Education, but in particular the absence of educational qualifications, is an extremely powerful predictor of household poverty" (Nolan & Whelan, 1999, p.34).

Literacy and Numeracy

Basic literacy and numeracy skills are considered to be essential for full participation in economic and social life (OECD, 1992). Such skills play an important role in the lives of early school leavers. Firstly, it is likely that at least some of those who drop out of school do so partly because of literacy or numeracy problems, and secondly, those who drop out may have poor job prospects as a result of their low skills. The Irish results of the International Adult Literacy Survey indicate that, of those surveyed with no qualifications, approximately 15% believed that both their literacy and numeracy skills limited their employment opportunities. Furthermore, although approximately 25% of the Irish adult

population scored at the lowest level of literacy, over half of those with no qualifications did so (Morgan, Hickey & Kellaghan, 1997). As Morgan et al. stated “While there are some exceptions at every educational level... level of education is one of the strongest correlates of literacy performance” (p.53).

While it could be argued that poor literacy or numeracy leads to early school leaving, rather than vice versa, some evidence suggests that those who remain in school show greater gains across a variety of tests of cognitive functioning than do those who drop out. Analysis of part of the American High School and Beyond dataset revealed that while future dropouts fared worse than their classmates on a battery of cognitive tests, after dropout the differences between the two groups had further increased (Alexander, Natriello & Pallas, 1985).

Psychological Well-Being

Although the economic effects of early school leaving are well documented, relatively little attention has been paid to effects on psychological well-being. What little research has been carried out suggests that early school leaving is associated with poorer mental health. American high school dropouts have been found to have significantly poorer scores on measures of depression, anxiety and coping, even controlling for the effects of prior psychological mental health, gender, father’s occupational status and ethnic background (Kaplan, Damphousse & Kaplan, 1994). The relationship between dropping out of high school before graduation and subsequent psychological dysfunction appears to be more pronounced for females (Kaplan, Damphousse & Kaplan, 1996). However, male dropouts may express psychological dysfunction in other ways. For example, they consume significantly more alcohol than do male graduates, while there are no significant differences between female graduates and dropouts (McCaul et al., 1992).

Little Irish research has been carried out analysing the relationship between early school leaving and subsequent mental health. An exception to this is the work of Hannan and O’Riain (1993), who administered the General Health Questionnaire to their sample of 1981/82 school leavers, followed up five to six years later. They found “a clear relationship between higher levels of education and greater well-being, with those leaving school with no qualifications at all being highly distressed” (p.158).

Marriage and Parenthood

Educational attainment has a significant impact on marital and parental status. Those who leave school without any qualifications are likely to marry and to become parents at a younger age than are those who leave with qualifications. Indeed, the marriage rate (in the

five or six years after leaving school) for a sample of Irish males and females who left without qualification or after sitting the Group Certificate was more than three times that of their counterparts who had attended college (Hannan & O’Riain, 1993). Furthermore, female early school leavers are more likely to marry at a young age than their male counterparts and are overrepresented among young single mothers (Hannan & O’Riain, 1993; Schwartz, 1995). Eleven percent of Hannan and O’Riain’s sample of females who left without qualification or after sitting the Group Certificate had become single mothers, compared to only 1.3% of those with a Leaving Certificate and 1.4% of those who attended third level.

Criminal Activity

Early school leavers are more likely to engage in criminal activities and to be imprisoned than are school leavers with qualifications. Of 108 male prisoners interviewed in Mountjoy prison, one third had never attended post-primary school, while 80% left school before 16 years of age (O’Mahony, 1997). Only 25% had sat a public examination, and of these, several had taken the examination while in prison.

These findings are similar to those found in other countries. For example, 79% of a sample of male inmates of an American prison were high school dropouts (Stephens, 1990), while Schwartz (1995), in a review of research on dropouts indicated that almost half of the US prison population were high school dropouts. Similarly, the National Prison Survey in England and Wales found that 66% of prisoners had no formal qualifications (Walmsley, Howard & White, 1992).

Over half of drug users receiving treatment in Ireland during 1996 had left school either before or upon reaching 15 years of age, while 8.7% reported that they had completed primary school only (Moran, O’Brien & Duff, 1997). Given that those treated were generally young (with a mean age of 24 for males and 23 for females), their educational attainment was not only well below that of the general Irish population, but considerably below that of their age group, nationally. For example, OECD (1998) data for 1996 show that only 34% of Irish people aged 25 to 34 did not complete *Senior Cycle*, which is considerably lower than the percentage of the drug treatment population who did not even complete *Junior Cycle*. Thus, it would appear that there is a far higher rate of early school leaving among treated drug users than in the general population.

In summary, there are many negative consequences of early school leaving. Compared to those who leave school with a qualification, early school leavers are more likely to be unemployed, to be unemployed for longer periods of time, to earn less and are

over-represented among those living below the poverty line. They are more likely to have poor levels of literacy and numeracy and poorer mental health. Female early school leavers are more likely to marry and to become mothers at an early age, and are far more likely than females who complete Senior Cycle to become single mothers. Finally, early school leavers are over-represented in the prison and drug treatment populations.

Characteristics of Early School Leavers

As noted, the aims of this study were to identify the characteristics of actual early school leavers, and to use the indicators in the development of a template, which could in turn be used to identify potential early school leavers. Clearly, any attempt to identify characteristics of early school leavers should be grounded in previous research. In considering such research, factors associated with dropout will be grouped under the broad categories of individual and family characteristics, environmental aspects, and school characteristics (Natriello, 1994; Rumberger, 1995).

Individual Pupil and Family Characteristics

Although research has been criticised for overemphasising the background characteristics of early school leavers and paying little attention to school-related factors (Boldt, 1994; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), research is consistent in finding background characteristics, family context, *and* school experiences predictive of early school leaving.

Background Characteristics

Numerous studies have found that dropouts are more likely to be male and to come from low socioeconomic status families with structural disadvantage, for example, lone-parent families, large families, other early school leavers in the family, or parents with low levels of education (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Greaney & Kellaghan, 1984; Hannan & O’Riain, 1993; Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice & Tremblay, 1997).

In Ireland, about twice as many boys as girls leave with no qualifications (McCoy et al., 1999), although gender differences are slightly less pronounced in countries such as America. Family structure has been identified as a predictor of early school leaving, with those from lone-parent or step-parent families overrepresented among early school leavers (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack and Rock, 1986). However, the effects of family structure are at least partly linked to socioeconomic status and associated variables. Thus, controlling for socioeconomic status can reduce or remove the relationship between family structure and dropout (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997; Rumberger, 1995).

Socioeconomic status, typically measured by parental education, occupation or income is generally found to be associated with dropout. Of those who left school in 1996/97 without completing Junior Cycle, 27.2% of males and 36.1% of females had fathers who were unemployed (McCoy et al., 1999). Hannan and O'Riain (1993) found a "highly significant effect of father's occupational status ...[and] highly significant independent effects of mother's education and number of children in the family, respectively, on educational attainment" (p.102). Indeed, of the early school leavers in their sample, none was from upper middle class origins and only 0.5% had mothers who had completed the Leaving Certificate.

International research also tends to find that members of ethnic minorities have higher dropout rates, although Rumberger (1987) found that ethnic differences were not significant when socioeconomic status was controlled. In an Irish context, high rates of early school leaving have been found among members of the Travelling community. Of the estimated 2,000 to 2,400 Traveller children between the ages of 12 and 15, some 1,400 to 1,600 are not in education (Task Force on the Travelling Community, 1996).

Family Context

Rumberger (1995) criticised previous research on early school leavers for focussing too much on status and structural characteristics of the family (such as SES) and for not examining family processes or parenting styles. A growing body of research indicates that limited parental involvement in schooling, poor parental aspirations, lack of supervision and a permissive parenting style are associated with school underachievement and dropout (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger, 1995). While Irish research has not focussed on early school leaving and family processes, Morgan, Shiel, Hickey, Forde and Murtagh (1995) found that socioeconomic status and 'home atmosphere' variables (home organisation, parental expectations and parent-child interaction) explained two to three times as much of the variance in reading achievement scores as socioeconomic status alone. Also, homes of similar socioeconomic status (in a disadvantaged Dublin area) have been found to vary considerably in terms of their educational environment, with the latter being related to pupils' achievement (Kellaghan, 1977).

Experience in School

Pupils' experiences of schooling are a significant predictor of early school leaving. Indeed, some research has indicated that variables relating to school experience are the best screening predictors for potential dropout, and that other variables such as family, behaviour and personality (although significant) add little to the predictive capacity of school experiences (Janosz et al., 1997).

Those who experience difficulty in meeting the academic demands of school, who get low grades, and who are retained at a grade level are those most likely to become early school leavers (Alexander et al., 1997; Rumberger, 1995; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Indeed, Rumberger (1995) identified grade retention as the single most powerful school-related predictor. Those who are retained at a grade level often find that they are older than their classmates, a factor that has been associated with early school leaving in an Irish context (Granville, 1982). The difficulties experienced in meeting academic demands increase over time. Whereas pupils may fall only slightly behind their classmates in the early years of their schooling, as time goes on they experience more difficulty and less success in a school context, weakening their motivation to stay in school (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Natriello, 1982).

Aside from academic problems, absenteeism and misbehaviour are predictive of high school dropout, from as early as elementary school (Alexander et al., 1997; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989). Irish research also indicates that absenteeism is a major predictor of early school leaving (Granville, 1982; Greaney & Kellaghan, 1984).

Environmental Aspects

Environmental factors determine the extent to which schooling is perceived to be relevant to pupils' current and future lives. Pupils are likely to drop out when the values they experience at school do not accord with those of their peer group or when they do not see a connection between their work at school and their future economic prospects (Rumberger, 1995). They are also likely to drop out when conditions outside school (e.g., alcohol and drug abuse, social disorganization within the community) militate against regular and continuous attendance at school.

Community Factors

Although few studies have examined the effects of living in a disadvantaged area on educational attainment, those that have done so have typically found significant effects. Educational attainment in America is negatively associated with high welfare-receipt and male unemployment rates in an area, even controlling for family background variables, region and community size (Corcoran, Gordon, Laren & Solon, cited in Crane, 1991). Indeed, there is some evidence of a 'contagion factor'. Crane (1991) found that when the percentage of what he termed 'high status' workers in a neighbourhood dropped below 4%, there were dramatic increases in dropout rates. For example, for whites the estimated dropout probability was almost 15 times greater once the percentage of high status workers dropped below 4%.

Research in Scotland has found that area-based deprivation scores were negatively associated with educational attainment, even after controlling for pupil ability at age 12, family background and schools (Garner & Raudenbush, 1991).

Peer Influence

Peers have a significant influence on early school leaving. Those who drop out of school are more likely to have friends who also drop out. As Finn (1989) stated “it is well documented that dropouts as well as delinquents associate with friends with like behavior” (p.121). However, gender moderates the nature of this association, with males more likely than females to cite friends dropping out as a reason for their own dropout (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996). Other factors, such as the nature of the residential environment, may affect the nature of peer influence. Overcrowded living conditions may force children to play on the streets. In areas where such overcrowding is the norm, children have restricted contact with adults, and are more susceptible to peer group influence (Garner & Raudenbush, 1991).

Early school leavers tend to perceive themselves to be less popular and to have a slightly more deviant peer group than their classmates. American high school students who believed that other students saw them as troublemakers and not good students were 50% more likely to drop out than other students (Rumberger, 1995). Also, dropouts were more likely to have friends who truanted, were not interested in school, and who did not get good grades (Ekstrom et al., 1986).

School Characteristics

A number of commentators (such as Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989) have argued that the role of pupil characteristics has been overemphasised and that of school characteristics largely neglected in research on early school leaving, with the result that the blame for dropout or academic problems is placed on the pupil, while schools escape responsibility. Early school leavers themselves have generally ascribed considerable importance to school characteristics. Irish early school leavers interviewed by Boldt (1994) indicated that school and teacher characteristics were the main factors in their decision to drop out. Similarly, among the main reasons reported for dropout by American high school dropouts were negative experiences with teachers and other students, as well as school atmosphere (Chow, 1996).

Recent developments of statistical techniques such as Hierarchical Linear Modelling have allowed researchers to examine more precisely the relative effects of school and pupil characteristics. As a result, it has become more widely accepted that

characteristics of individual schools play an important part in academic attainment and early school leaving.

Structural Characteristics of Schools

A number of school structural characteristics have been found to be associated with increased dropout rates, including school type, school size and available resources. In an Irish context, those attending vocational schools are more likely to drop out than those attending other types of school (Smyth, 1999).

American research has found that smaller schools tend to have lower dropout rates than larger schools, possibly because of greater opportunity for informal face-to-face interaction between teachers and students (Cotton, 1996). No effect for school size has been found on dropout rates in Irish schools (Smyth, 1999), but this may be due to difference in average school sizes between Ireland and America. The majority of Irish post-primary schools have an enrolment of between 300-600, whereas American high school enrolments frequently exceed 2,000.

School Climate

The ethos and climate of a school can affect dropout rates. Post-primary schools perceived by pupils to be strict have lower levels of dropout, whereas schools characterised by low teacher and low pupil expectations, poor or negative pupil-teacher interactions and high absenteeism have a high dropout rate (Smyth, 1999). Dropout was found to be lower in American high schools where there was an emphasis on academic pursuits, less internal differentiation (in terms of student background characteristics and of how schools structured academic programmes in response to student differences), and an orderly environment (Bryk & Thum, 1989). Finally, ability grouping or 'streaming' appears to be associated with increased dropout rates (Hannan & Boyle, 1987; Smyth, 1999).

School Organisation and Management

The manner in which schools are managed is related to early school leaving. Schools in which the principal offers leadership, but involves staff in decision-making and setting goals are more effective (Purkey & Smith, 1983). In particular, school-based staff development, the manner in which new teachers are inducted, and rate of staff turnover are linked to achievement, truancy and early school leaving (Cheng, 1995; Purkey & Smith, 1983). Schools in which pupils are formally involved in decision-making, such as through a pupils' council or a prefect system, have been found to have lower rates of early school leaving (Smyth, 1999).

Student Composition

The composition of a school's enrolment (in terms of social background) can have an effect on achievement and on dropout rates. Where schools have an enrolment that is predominantly disadvantaged, pupils tend to do worse academically, and to have higher dropout rates than would be predicted from analysis of pupil characteristics at an individual level. Although parental social class is related to dropout rates, the effects may be mediated by the social composition of the school's enrolment (Lee & Bryk, 1989; Smyth, 1999).

Identifying Potential Early School Leavers

Although there are a number of characteristics associated with early school leavers, attempts to predict early school leaving at the level of the individual have had mixed success. One of the main reasons for this is that while early school leavers may, as a group, have characteristics that differentiate them from non-dropouts, individual early school leavers will not have all of these differentiating characteristics, and indeed, some may have none of them.

For example, although early school leavers may be more likely than non-early school leavers to come from a lone-parent family, the majority live with both parents. Thus, predicting dropout on the basis of lone-parenthood means that dropouts who come from a two-parent household will not be predicted (false negatives) while non-dropouts who live in a lone-parent family will be predicted as dropouts (false positives). Even combining a number of predictor variables does not identify all dropouts, and can increase the number of false positives.

One of the better known tracking systems for identifying potential dropouts is that adopted by the Texas School Districts. In response to a directive from the Texas legislature, all school districts in the state were required to identify students at risk of dropping out. Using four criteria (overage for grade, two or more years below grade level in reading or mathematics, failing two or more courses in a semester, and failing any section of the state minimum skills test) led to between 40 to 50% of students being categorised as at risk on at least one criterion. In terms of predictive validity, only 32.3% of students identified as at risk dropped out, while many dropouts were not predicted (Bowman, cited in Gaustad, 1991). However, the inclusion of extra variables (such as demographic data and history of compensatory education), weighting the relative importance of variables and separate analysis by ethnic group increased the predictive validity to between 67.5% and 100%, depending on ethnicity (Wilkinson & Frazer, 1990).

Other researchers have also achieved reasonable discrimination (for example, Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Morris, Ehren & Lenz, 1991). However, it is likely that discrimination is less precise in the early years of schooling (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989), a factor that should be borne in mind, given that one of the aims of this research is to develop a tracking template for use in primary schools.

In sum, there is evidence that dropout can be predicted, although not with complete accuracy. However, all efforts to predict dropout have encountered difficulties with false negatives and false positives. In other words, not all potential early school leavers can be identified, and some who persist in school will be mistakenly identified as potential early school leavers. The negative impact of classifying a potential early school leaver as a persister is likely to be greater than the impact of classifying a persister as a potential early school leaver. Thus, it would seem that measures which allow for more accurate identification of early school leavers than persisters are preferable.

Developing a Tracking Template

There are two main aspects to defining the contents of a tracking template. Firstly, the variables for inclusion must be selected, and secondly, consideration must be given as to how selected variables will be used to identify potential early school leavers.

Selection of Variables

Ideally, a template for identifying potential early school leavers should contain measures of all variables that have been found to be associated with early school leaving. In practice, this is not feasible.

As data are likely to be entered by teachers, the construction of any template must take this into consideration. Firstly, information on certain types of variables is not available to teachers. For example, even though home process variables and aspects of the local area are important predictors of early school leaving, teachers could not reasonably be expected to have sufficient knowledge of such variables. Data on variables such as demographic characteristics and school experiences, on the other hand, are readily available to teachers and are therefore the types of variables most suitable for inclusion.

Secondly, if large volumes of data need to be entered for each pupil, it is unlikely that the template will be used properly. For a template to be an effective predictive tool, it must be used in a uniform manner, the data entered must be accurate, and it must be easy to use. Thus, only a small number of variables should be selected for inclusion in a template. Variables selected should represent those that are easily quantifiable, and which are most likely to distinguish between early school leavers and those who do not drop out.

Deriving an 'At Risk' Score

As noted, tracking systems have had difficulty with over-identification of those at risk of dropout. In particular, defining a pupil as at risk on the basis of falling into at least one category has been problematic. The subsequent over-identification of those at risk has led to too large a group for any targeted intervention. However, classifying only those who fall into all categories can lead to under-identification, as few potential early school leavers will display all the factors associated with dropout. Use of multiple indicators, each with an assigned weight of relative importance, appears to be a more effective approach (Morris et al., 1991; Wilkinson & Frazer, 1990). Scores on these indicators can then be summed, and an 'at risk' score derived for every pupil entered.

Contents of the Report

Although certain types of variable (such as demographic variables and school experiences) are most suitable for inclusion in a template, analyses in this report are not limited to these. This is because identifying a range of characteristics associated with early school leavers is one of the main aims of the research, even if some of these are not suitable for eventual inclusion in a template.

Thus, the extent to which factors associated with early school leaving in other research are also associated in the present sample of early school leavers is explored. Attention is paid to family background, family context, experiences in school, peer influence, and the communities from which the early school leavers came, as well as the characteristics of schools attended by early school leavers.

Chapter 2 describes the methods used to identify the sample of early school leavers, and the methods of data collection employed. Chapter 3 summarises the results of interviews with early school leavers and a comparison group of their classmates who did not drop out of school. Chapter 4 summarises how primary and post-primary teachers described the characteristics of those identified as early school leavers, while Chapter 5 compares the responses of the early school leavers and their teachers. Chapter 6 describes the characteristics of the schools and communities from which the early school leavers were drawn. Finally, the conclusions of the study, and the implications for the development of a tracking template are presented in Chapter 7.

2. Methodology

Methods used to track and contact early school leavers are described in this chapter, which includes the original research specification designed by the Department of Education and Science, and the modifications made to the design by the Educational Research Centre. The selection of schools and pupils that were tracked, how pupils were tracked, the results of tracking, and the procedures used to contact and interview early school leavers and a comparison group are described.

The chapter also describes methods used in collecting data from primary and post-primary teachers on the characteristics of identified early school leavers, the schools that they attended and the communities local to those schools. Finally, a brief description of the instruments used to collect the data is provided.

Background to Sampling Procedures

In June 1998 the Department of Education and Science invited tenders to undertake research into the extent and causes of early school leaving in Ireland. The research methodology as defined in the research specification is outlined in this section, followed by a description of suggested modifications to the original specification, and a more detailed description of the actual methodology used in the research.

Department of Education and Science Research Specification

It was suggested in the original specification that a group of pupils be tracked from 3rd class to the completion of Junior Cycle. The pupils were to be selected from those who were in 3rd class in either 1990 or 1991, in four different locations, and tracked until they sat the Junior Certificate examination in 1997 or 1998. The focus of the project was to be on pupils who left school during this seven-year period without completing the Junior Certificate examination. By eliminating from this list those who repeated a year, or were in private education, in schools outside the selected areas, or who had died, those who had left the formal school system while still of compulsory school-going age would be identified. Each pupil's progress was then to be tracked and data gathered on a range of indicators including attitudes, behavioural difficulties, absenteeism, suspension, attainment, recourse to remedial and support services in school, and other family or individually oriented statutory and voluntary interventions.

The research specification suggested that approximately 80 pupils who left school between the ages of eight and fifteen would need to be interviewed to gain an understanding of the factors related to early school leaving. It was suggested that to identify 80 early school leavers, approximately 1000 pupils¹ would need to be tracked from 3rd class. The project was to be conducted in four separate locations, one location was a densely populated area in Dublin with high levels of disadvantage, one in a disadvantaged area in Cork, one in a disadvantaged area in a provincial town, and the fourth in a cluster of small schools in the rural strand of the *Breaking the Cycle* project.

Suggested Revisions to Methodology

In response to the specification, the Educational Research Centre (ERC) drew up a tender outlining a revised strategy. Although agreeing with the general structure outlined, it was proposed to revise the methodology in the following ways:

- tracking a cohort of pupils in *one* specific years' enrolment, instead of the two years suggested in the research specification;
- selected schools to be chosen, where possible, from those participating in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme;
- tracking a greater number of pupils;
- selection of a greater number of schools;
- the inclusion of a comparison group, to allow characteristics of early school leavers to be compared with those of classmates who had completed the Junior Certificate examination.

The rationale for each of these suggested revisions will be explained in detail in the following sections.

Tracking a Single Year

It was suggested in the revised specification that it would be more useful to examine a single years' enrolment across a greater number of schools, rather than the suggested two consecutive years' enrolment. This alternative had the advantage of allowing representation from a greater number of schools, and of requiring less administrative effort and information from each participating school. It was hoped that minimising

¹ The NESF (1997) reported that 8% of Irish pupils left school without any formal qualifications in 1992. Therefore, tracking 1,000 pupils should allow for the identification of 80 early school leavers.

the amount of administrative effort from each school would lead to greater co-operation from schools.

The 1990/91 school year, rather than 1991/92, was suggested for selection. This was because the ERC had already tracked a large sample of pupils who were in 3rd class in 1990/91, but had no similar data on the 1991/92 cohort.

Selection of Breaking the Cycle Schools

The ERC had previously collected data on the Junior Certificate completion rates of pupils who were in 6th class in *Breaking the Cycle* schools during 1993/94. As the majority of these pupils would be expected to have been in 3rd class during 1990/91, it was suggested that some of the previously collected data could be utilised, thereby considerably reducing the amount of work required to track pupils.

Three of the four locations suggested in the original specification were also locations for schools participating in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme (disadvantaged areas in Dublin and Cork, and a rural cluster of *Breaking the Cycle* schools). Therefore, it was suggested that *Breaking the Cycle* schools in these three locations be selected. As there were no *Breaking the Cycle* schools located in a provincial town, it was suggested that only schools that were involved in the *Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage* be considered for selection for the provincial component.

Increasing the Number of Pupils Tracked

The original specification recommended that approximately 80 early school leavers should be interviewed, and that approximately 1,000 pupils would need to be tracked from 3rd class in order to achieve 80 interviews. However, it seemed probable that, in order to interview 80 early school leavers, a significantly larger number would have to be identified. The rationale for this was that a sizeable number would probably refuse to be interviewed, or prove to be uncontactable.

From experience of similar projects, the ERC had found that difficulties with retrospective tracking meant that a significant proportion of the sample might prove impossible to track. For example, the ERC had recently engaged in a similar retrospective tracking project for the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme. At the time of submitting the tender, 13.65% of that sample remained untracked. It was also anticipated that some schools might not be willing to co-operate with the project. When similar data were requested from *Breaking the Cycle* schools, 2 out of 156

schools refused to supply the information necessary to track their pupils. Given that participation offered no tangible benefits for schools, unlike participating in the *Breaking the Cycle* evaluation, it was possible that a number of schools would provide either inadequate or no information about pupils. To allow for all these factors, it was suggested that to interview 80 pupils, between 1,000 and 1,300 pupils would need to be tracked from 3rd class.

Selecting a Greater Number of Schools

To identify the sample of early school leavers, the original specification suggested selecting one school in each of Dublin, Cork, and a large provincial town, as well as a cluster of small rural schools participating in *Breaking the Cycle*. However, selecting the largest possible eligible school from each area and a *Breaking the Cycle* cluster of 5 schools would only have yielded a total sample of approximately 350-400² 3rd class pupils in 1990/91. Using estimates based on the data presented by the NESF, this would have permitted the identification of approximately 30 early school leavers, which would have been an insufficient number.

Therefore, it was proposed that four schools in each of Dublin and Cork should be included in the sample. The ERC suggested that the typical *Breaking the Cycle* rural cluster might not have sufficient numbers of pupils to guarantee the identification of *any* early school leavers. However, ten clusters would contain approximately 350-400 pupils and would be expected to allow the identification of sufficient numbers of early school leavers.

Based on enrolment data, most provincial towns would not be suitable for selection, as they did not have sufficient pupils enrolled in 3rd class in schools designated as disadvantaged. To ensure sufficient numbers of early school leavers, the revised specification proposed that *two* provincial towns would need to be selected. It was suggested that Dundalk and Drogheda would be the most suitable towns, as they have eight schools with 3rd classes that are included in the *Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage*. These eight schools were estimated to have between 300-400 pupils enrolled in 3rd class in 1990/91, thereby allowing for identification of an adequate number of early school leavers.

² The figures reported were retrospective estimates based on the numbers of pupils in 6th class in 1993/1994 because information on the numbers in 3rd class in these schools in 1990/91 was not available.

Inclusion of a Comparison Group

The ERC also suggested interviewing a comparison group, in addition to the 80 early school leavers. It was suggested that to gain a good understanding of the causes of early school leaving, a group of pupils who had attended the same primary and post-primary schools as the early school leavers but who subsequently had *completed* the Junior Certificate would also need to be interviewed. This group would consist of 40 students who were matched to the 80 early school leavers by school attended, gender and age. Rather than depending exclusively on interviews with school leavers, information on a comparison group should offer further insight into the factors related to early school leaving, and the factors facilitating remaining in school.

The Department of Education and Science accepted the suggested modifications to the original research specification in November 1998. The next section will describe in detail the methods used to carry out the research.

Selection of Schools

Apart from the basic requirement to have representation from rural, urban and provincial town populations, the selection of schools was heavily influenced by the availability of a large database collected for the evaluation of the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme.

Breaking the Cycle Database

The *Breaking the Cycle* database is composed of a list of pupils who were in 6th class in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1993/1994. The database includes the names of pupils, their home addresses, date of birth, and the post-primary school to which they transferred. As part of the *Breaking the Cycle* evaluation, the pupil details were sent to the Department of Education and Science's Post-Primary Pupil Database Section (PPPDBS) for matching with their Student ID numbers and to ascertain whether or not they had sat the Junior Certificate examination. The information that had been gathered involved significant effort on the part of a large number of schools, and by the Department of Education and Science's PPPDBS. Therefore, it seemed logical to use some of this information, particularly as it could be used to select both urban and rural disadvantaged schools.

Location of Schools

As stated, the schools involved in the project had to be selected from disadvantaged areas in Dublin, Cork, *Breaking the Cycle* rural clusters and a provincial town. To obtain an adequate representation of early school leavers, a sample of 350-400 pupils would need to be tracked in each of the urban, rural and provincial locations.

Selection of Rural Schools

There are 25 clusters of rural schools in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme, each containing between four to six small schools. Based on average cluster size, 10 clusters would contain approximately 350-400 pupils and would have been expected to allow the identification of a sufficient number of rural early school leavers.

Rather than randomly select 10 clusters from the 25, the most disadvantaged were selected. To do this, the level of disadvantage associated with each school in a cluster (as measured by a score assigned to each school derived from poverty-based application criteria) was summed to achieve a disadvantage score for the cluster as a whole. In addition, reading and Mathematics achievement data (collected as part of the *Breaking the Cycle* evaluation) were available for two schools from each cluster. Therefore, clusters were ranked according to their disadvantage score, and by pupil achievement data. By collating these rankings, it was possible to select 10 clusters that were characterised by above average levels of disadvantage and below average pupil performance on achievement tests.

Using these criteria, the ten clusters selected were: Ceantar na nOileáin, Tullaghan Bay, Buncrana, Frenchpark, Belmullet, Leitir Mór, Downings / Carrigart, Clew Bay, Iorrus and Renvyle. The 50 schools in these clusters had a total of approximately 425-475 pupils in 3rd class during the 1990/91 school year.

Selection of Urban Schools

There were 25 Dublin primary schools initially involved in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme. Of these, eight were junior schools while another had closed down, leaving 16 schools suitable for selection. The four schools selected were Jobstown Senior National School, Darndale Senior National School, O'Connell's CBS, and Knockmore Senior National School. These schools had a combined total of 350-400 3rd class pupils in 1990/91, an adequate sample size for the Dublin component of the research. The schools provided a mixture of inner city, suburban, and northside / southside locations, and provided a gender balance.

In Cork, there were five schools participating in *Breaking the Cycle*. Four were selected (Scoil Aiseirí Chríost, Scoil Iosagáin, and both The Glen Boys' National School and Girls' National School). The schools had approximately 150-200 pupils in 3rd class in 1990/91. The selection offered an even gender representation, as two were girls' schools and two were boys' schools. Also, Scoil Aiseirí Chríost and Scoil Iosagáin each served the same area, as did The Glen Boys' National School and The Glen Girls' National School.

By combining the estimated numbers from the Cork and Dublin schools, the sample size for the urban component of the project was expected to be in the region of 500-600 pupils.

Selection of Provincial Schools

As no single provincial town had sufficient pupil numbers in schools designated as disadvantaged, Dundalk and Drogheda were selected as the most suitable alternative. They were within close proximity of each other and had eight schools with 3rd classes that are included in the *Scheme of Assistance to School in Designated Areas of Disadvantage*.

In Dundalk, six schools (Castletown Girls' National School, St. Nicholas' Monastery National School, Redeemer Boys' National School, Redeemer Girls' National School, St. Joseph's National School, and Scoil Chríost Rí) had a combined total of 200-250 pupils in 3rd class in 1990/91. In Drogheda, two schools (St. Paul's National School and Marymount National School) had approximately 100-150 3rd class pupils in 1990/91. Therefore, it was estimated that a sample of 300-400 pupils could be tracked from the two towns.

Expected Sample Size

Based on the selection of schools, it was expected that a sample of between 1,225 and 1,475 3rd class pupils would be available for tracking purposes. A sample of this size would allow for adequate representation of early school leavers from each of Dublin, Cork, two provincial towns and a rural population.

Tracking Procedures

This section describes the procedures used to track pupils from 3rd class to completion or non-completion of the Junior Certificate examination. For clarity, the stages are first summarised and then described in detail.

1. Collection of details of 3rd class pupils in selected schools in 1990/91.
2. Matching with PPPDBS.
3. Follow-up on non-matched pupils with primary and post-primary schools.
4. Further matching with PPPDBS.
5. Verification of early school leaver status with post-primary school.
6. Gathering of contact details for early school leavers.
7. Selection of a comparison group.

Collection of Pupil Details

All selected schools were contacted and asked to supply details of pupils who were enrolled in 3rd class in their school during the 1990/91 school year. As is explained in detail in the next two sections, the data that a school were asked to supply depended on whether the school was included in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme or not.

Breaking the Cycle Schools

To identify pupils who were in 3rd class in selected schools during 1990/91, the ERC initially examined the *Breaking the Cycle* 6th class database, containing 2,036 pupils in total. Of these pupils, 1,047 were from schools selected for inclusion in the 8-to 15-Year Old Early School Leavers Initiative. Each selected school was sent a list of their 1993/94 6th class pupils (and the post-primary schools to which they transferred) and asked to update the information so that it referred to their 1990/91 3rd class.

Schools were asked to *remove* from the list any pupils who were not in 3rd class in 1990/91, and to *add* details of any pupils who were in 3rd class but were not part of the 1993/94 6th class. Because schools had already supplied much of the relevant information to the Educational Research Centre, this method required far less effort on the part of school personnel than having to supply full details of all pupils of interest. When the information was returned from the primary schools it was found that 101 of the pupils had not been enrolled in 3rd class in 1990/91. These pupils were therefore removed from the database. Seventy-six pupils, who had been enrolled in 3rd class in 1990/91 but had not been in 6th class in 1993/94, were added to the database.

As noted earlier, two schools in the *Breaking the Cycle* project did not return any pupil details. However, when information was requested as part of 8- to 15-Year Old Early School Leavers Initiative both schools supplied details for a total of 29 pupils. Thus a total of 105 pupils (76 who were not in 6th class in 1993/94 and 29 from the two extra schools) were added to the database, leaving a total of 1,051 pupils to be tracked.

Dundalk and Drogheda Schools

Selected schools from Dundalk and Drogheda (non-*Breaking the Cycle* schools) were asked to provide details of their 1990/91 3rd class. Specifically, they were asked for the full name, date of birth and address of each pupil, as well as the name and roll number of the school (primary or post-primary) to which they transferred. Using this method, a total of 340 pupils were identified as having been in 3rd class in the selected Dundalk and Drogheda schools in 1990/91.

Total 3rd class Pupils

The aim of collecting pupil details was to track all pupils from 3rd class as far as Junior Certificate completion. However, the following pupils were not considered eligible for tracking purposes: pupils who had emigrated, pupils who had received their education privately, and pupils who were deceased. Although the original research specification suggested that pupils who have moved out of the area should be omitted from the tracking process, the ERC felt that it was important to include such pupils. To omit them from the study might have resulted in reduced numbers of pupils available for interview or an underrepresentation of some groups of pupils in the sample (e.g. members of the Travelling community).

In total there were 1,391 pupils attending 3rd class in 1990/91 in the selected schools. Of these, 15 were removed from the database, as they were ineligible for tracking. Eleven had emigrated, three had left the area with no new address, and one had died, leaving 1,376 pupils eligible for tracking. Table 2.1 summarises the number of eligible pupils in each of the selected locations. As can be seen, 602 of those to be tracked were from Dublin or Cork, 438 were from rural areas, and 336 were from Dundalk and Drogheda.

Table 2.1. Numbers of eligible pupils, by area, attending 3rd class in selected schools in 1990/91.

	N
Breaking the Cycle urban pupils	602
Breaking the Cycle rural pupils	438
Dundalk and Drogheda pupils	336
Total	1376

Matching with Post-Primary Pupil Database ID

The original details of 6th class *Breaking the Cycle* pupils had already been sent to the PPPDBS for ID matching. In total, 850 of the selected sample had been successfully matched with their post-primary ID numbers, while 85 had not. A further 105 eligible pupils had not been included in the original database, as they were not in 6th class in 1993/94. Of the 190 unmatched pupils, 104 were from urban locations and 86 from rural locations. When added to the 336 pupils from Dundalk and Drogheda, there remained a total of 526 pupils that needed to be matched with their Student ID.

Not all of these pupils' details were ready to be sent to the Department, as some were missing vital information, such as the post-primary schools to which they had transferred. The first batch of pupil details sent to the PPPDBS consisted of 337 pupils: 263 from Dundalk and Drogheda; 58 rural; and 16 urban pupils. As can be seen from Table 2.2, the vast majority of these were successfully matched to their post-primary ID numbers.

Table 2.2. Numbers and percentages of pupils, by location, successfully matched to their Student ID number by PPPDBS.

Location	Number sent	Successfully matched	Percentage
Urban	16	15	93.75%
Rural	58	56	96.55%
Provincial	263	253	96.20%
Total	337	324	96.14%

Follow-Up of Non-Matched Pupils with Primary and Post-Primary Schools

Following initial matching of pupil details, 202 pupils (89 urban, 30 rural, and 83 provincial) remained unmatched. The primary schools of origin for these pupils were re-contacted to confirm the details that had been supplied, and to inquire about further information that might help in locating these pupils. Information such as the names, dates of birth, original post-primary school transferred to, and year of transfer were all checked. A particular problem encountered related to the language in which pupil names were recorded. Many primary schools kept their records of pupils in Irish, whereas almost all post-primary schools used the names by which their students were generally known (almost always, the English version). Therefore, many names had to be translated into English to facilitate matching with the PPPDBS.

The post-primary schools to which pupils transferred were also contacted. They were asked if the specific pupils had ever attended the school, and if details such as name and first year of attendance were correct. In addition, the schools were asked whether the identified pupils who attended their school had sat the Junior Certificate examination.

Further Matching with the PPPDBS

Based on contact with schools, an amended list of 146 pupils was sent to the Department of Education and Science's PPPDBS for matching. Of these, 66 were urban, 24 rural, and 56 provincial. As can be seen from Table 2.3, the vast majority were successfully matched with Student ID numbers.

Table 2.3. Numbers and percentages of successfully matched pupils, by location, from 2nd batch sent to PPPDBS.

	Number sent	Successfully matched	Percentage
Urban	66	61	92.42%
Rural	24	24	100%
Provincial	56	53	94.64%
Total	146	138	94.52%

When those matched during the present investigation were added to those initially matched from the *Breaking the Cycle* database, the result was that almost all pupils were successfully matched with their Student ID. As can be seen from Table 2.4, only 4.65% remained unmatched, while 201 (14.61%) had been identified as having left school before sitting the Junior Certificate examination.

Table 2.4. Numbers and percentages of total sample that either remained unmatched, had completed the Junior Certificate, or were early school leavers.

	N	%
Unmatched to ID	64	4.65%
Sat Junior Certificate	1111	80.74%
Early School Leaver	201	14.61%
Total	1376	100%

Verification of Early School Leaver Status

Before attempts were made to contact and interview students identified as early school leavers, post-primary schools were contacted to confirm that those identified were indeed early school leavers. Most post-primary schools had less than five identified early school leavers, and were therefore able to confirm their status over the phone. However, in cases where there were a large number of early school leavers from one school, a list was sent to the school and written confirmation of each student's early school leaver status was requested.

When this information was returned from the schools, 22 (10.94%) of those identified by the Department of Education and Science as early school leavers were found to have completed the Junior Certificate examination. This reduced the total number of early school leavers to 179, of which 92 were from urban areas, 29 from rural areas, and 58 from Dundalk and Drogheda.

Gathering of Contact Details

The next stage of the process involved obtaining accurate contact details of the early school leavers, including, where possible, phone numbers. This involved contacting the schools that they had attended and seeking the most up-to-date information. Initially, the post-primary schools were contacted, as it was expected that they would have the most up-to-date details. In reality, when the post-primary schools were contacted it transpired that they had phone numbers for few, if any, of their former students. In fact, a number of post-primary schools had few personal details in relation to former students.

In an attempt to access phone numbers and contact details for a greater number of early school leavers, the primary schools that they attended were re-contacted. In this way some extra contact numbers were located. An extensive trawl through telephone books and the assistance of directory enquiries were used as a means of

gathering extra contact numbers. At the end of this process, a total of 82 phone numbers had been collected, representing 45.81% of the 179 confirmed early school leavers.

Selection of a Comparison Group

According to the information returned from the Department of Education and Science's PPPDBS, just over 80% of the total sample had completed the Junior Certificate examination. The comparison group was to be comprised of 40 students from this sub-sample, who were still enrolled in Senior Cycle in post-primary school. As it seemed likely that contacting members of a comparison group through a school that they were currently attending would be much simpler than trying to contact them after they had left school, priority was given to organising interviews before the students sat their Leaving Certificate examination.

Unfortunately, this meant that the majority of early school leaver interviews had not been completed when the comparison group was chosen. Therefore, an exact match on age and gender between the two groups was not possible. However, only those who had attended the same primary and post-primary schools as identified early school leavers were selected for inclusion in the comparison group. Further, the sample selected for the comparison group mirrored the gender and age composition of the larger group of identified early school leavers (which would presumably be similar to the composition of the group of early school leavers who would eventually be interviewed). Finally, comparison group students were primarily selected from schools where there were appreciable numbers of early school leavers.

In total, 95 comparison students were selected from those matched by the PPPDBS, with representation from Dublin, Cork and Dundalk. Rural students were chosen from either Donegal or Galway. The number selected for inclusion was more than double the actual number required. This was to allow for those unwilling to participate, and for the fact that some might have left school.

Results of Tracking

From the original sample of 1,376 eligible pupils, only 64 (4.65%) were not matched with the PPPDBS. From conversations with primary school principals about those not matched it might reasonably be assumed that a significant percentage of these did not complete Junior Cycle or even attend post-primary school. For example, principals

spoken to believed it likely that 16 of the 64 never transferred to post-primary school. Eighteen had left the area, meaning that principals had no idea what schools they attended. However, of the 18, four were Travellers, and the principal in question thought it likely that they had not transferred to post-primary school. Finally, while principals had doubts that some pupils had completed the Junior Cycle, there were four pupils that the principal either had heard had dropped out or were convinced that the pupil in question would not have sat the Junior Certificate examination.

Therefore, if the principals' opinions can be relied upon, 24 of the 64 missing pupils were almost certainly early school leavers. However, as it is not possible to definitively state that this is the case, these 64 pupils will be excluded from further analysis, leaving a total of 1,312 tracked pupils.

Initial data from the PPPDBS suggested that 201 (or 15.32% of those successfully tracked) of the sample were early school leavers. However, contact with schools revealed that 22 of those identified as early school leavers had actually completed their Junior Certificate examination. Therefore 10.94% of those identified as early school leavers (or 1.68% of the total sample) were actually 'false positives'. Removal of the false positives left a total of 179 pupils (13.64%) who were identified early school leavers (Table 2.5). When analysed by region, 7.08% of the rural sample were early school leavers, compared to 10.07% of the provincial and 15.88% of the urban sample.

Table 2.5. Numbers and percentages of the total sample who either were unmatched to a Student ID, sat the Junior Certificate examination, were early school leavers, or were incorrectly identified as early school leavers.

	N	%
Total Sample	1376	-----
Unmatched to ID	64	4.65
Total Sample Matched	1312	-----
Sat Junior Certificate	1111	84.68
Early School Leaver	179	13.64
Incorrectly identified as ESL	22	1.68

Of course, the actual number of early school leavers may have been higher, as the presence of false positives suggests the presence of false negatives (i.e., a number of students recorded as having sat the Junior Certificate examination who did not actually do so). However, there is no way to check if this is the case, other than

following up on each student, which would be extremely time-consuming. Therefore, it can only be stated that a minimum of 13.64% of the sample were early school leavers.

Interview Procedure

In this section, the procedure for interviewing early school leavers and the comparison group will be outlined.

Interviewers

In addition to ERC staff, it was necessary to use an outside agency to facilitate successful completion of the interviews with both early school leavers and members of the comparison group. To this end, the assistance of the National Training and Development Institute (NTDI) was enlisted. NTDI had training centres in most of the areas where the early school leavers were located and their staff had some previous experience in dealing with at-risk individuals. Six members of the NTDI staff, two from Jobstown, two from Dundalk, one from Cork and one from Galway, were trained in the administration of the early school leavers and comparison group interview schedules.

Contact Procedures

The guidelines for contacting, and for deciding that contact had failed to be established, differed for early school leavers and for those in the comparison group.

Early School Leavers

Each interviewer was given a list containing the names and contact details of early school leavers for the area they worked in. They were asked to interview a set number depending on the area. For example, NTDI staff members in Cork and Galway were asked to interview 10 early school leavers each. NTDI staff from Dundalk were required to interview 20 early school leavers, while the interviewers based in Tallaght were asked to interview between 10 and 15 early school leavers. It was envisaged that ERC staff would complete the remaining 10 rural interviews, primarily in Donegal, and as well as an additional 15 in various Dublin inner city and north-side locations.

Early school leavers for whom phone numbers had been found were contacted first. Initial attempts at contact revealed that 22 of the 82 phone numbers were incorrect (16 of the 82 numbers were wrong while six were no longer listed or were

ex-directory). Further attempts were made to update the list of phone numbers, through searching the phone book and directory enquiries, with little success. When contacting the early school leavers by telephone, a limit of four phone calls, where the call was answered but no contact was made with the early school leaver, was set as the point where contact attempts would cease. If, however, contact had been made with the school leaver, five calls were set as the limit before ending contact attempts.

Where phone numbers were not available, interviewers called to the homes of the early school leavers. If, after three visits, when there was someone in the home but no contact was made with the early school leaver, no further visits were attempted. If contact had not been established by this stage a letter was to be sent to the early school leaver's home outlining the project and inviting them to participate in the interview. Another house call was made subsequent to the letter, and after this, if unsuccessful, attempts at contact were terminated. In practice some interviewers used extra measures to contact as many early school leavers as possible. For example, some approached groups of youths on street corners and asked them if they knew the individual(s) concerned, while another contacted staff at a local Community Training Workshop to see if they could offer assistance in tracking early school leavers.

Comparison Group

It was planned that 14 members of the comparison group should be interviewed in Dublin, 6 in Cork, 10 in rural areas, and 10 in Dundalk and Drogheda.

The procedure for interviewing the comparison group was that schools where the students were attending would be contacted by ERC staff and the principals' co-operation sought. If this was granted, a list of the students that were to be interviewed was sent to the schools, along with consent forms for parents of potential interviewees. One week after the consent forms had been distributed, the schools were contacted to ascertain how many had been returned, and to schedule the interviews. If there was a slow return of consent forms, or if there was a high number of refusals, the ERC would then forward extra names of students who were eligible for inclusion in the comparison group. This procedure was to be repeated until the required number of comparison group members had been interviewed.

Amendment to Selection of Schools

While attempting to contact early school leavers, it became apparent that there would be a shortfall of completed interviews, particularly in the case of rural early school leavers. As only 29 rural early school leavers had been identified (3 of whom had moved from the area with no forwarding address), it seemed unlikely that 20 interviews could be completed. Therefore, the original *Breaking the Cycle* database was re-examined, and an additional seven early school leavers from schools in County Mayo were added. Of these, six were from schools that were not in the original sample of schools. The seventh had attended one of the schools originally selected, but was in 3rd class in 1989/90 rather than 1990/91. These seven students were added to the database of tracked pupils, thus bringing the total to 1,383.

Completion of Interviews

This section outlines the progress made in contacting and interviewing the early school leavers and members of the comparison group.

Early School Leavers Interviews

Including the additional Mayo pupils, there were a total of 186 early school leavers, of which 80 were to be interviewed. The 186 early school leavers can be divided into those with whom contact was established and those who were uncontactable. A total of 105 were found to be uncontactable (Table 2.6). Thirty-seven of these had either moved from the area or the wrong address had been supplied and an updated one was unavailable. The remaining 68 were individuals with whom contact could not be established, despite telephone calls (where phone numbers were available), calls to the early school leaver's home, and letters.

Eighty-one early school leavers were contacted with varying degrees of success (Table 2.6). Nineteen of those contacted refused to participate in the interview, while five early school leavers, when contacted, were found to have sat the Junior Certificate examination. Another three were unable to be interviewed for other reasons. Of these, one had a mother who was in intensive care at the time, one repeatedly did not turn up for interview, and the third died of an overdose the day before contact was established with the family.

Table 2.6. Numbers and percentages of contacted and non-contacted early school leavers.

	Status	N	%
Contacted	Sat Junior Certificate	5	2.69%
	Interviewed	54	29.03%
	Refused	19	10.22%
	Other	3	1.61%
	Total	81	43.55%
Not Contacted	Moved / Wrong address	37	19.89%
	Contact not established	68	36.56%
	Total	105	56.45%
Total Identified		186	100%

The remaining 54 early school leavers were successfully interviewed, of which there were 38 males and 16 females. Twenty-seven were from urban areas (19 males and 8 females), 10 were from Dundalk and Drogheda (7 males and 3 females), and 17 were from rural areas (12 males and 5 females).

Comparison Group Interviews

Over 1,000 pupils were identified as having completed the Junior Certificate examination. Of these, some left school immediately after the Junior Certificate, while others dropped out during fifth year or transition year. All these factors helped to reduce the number of eligible students for the comparison group. The post-primary schools where these comparison group interviews took place were selected because they had each been attended by a number of pupils who had also attended the same primary schools as the early school leavers. The composition of the comparison groups in each school was selected to reflect the age range and gender of the early school leavers for that particular area.

Dublin

It was planned to interview 14 comparison students in Dublin, from a list of over 250 identified as still attending school. Interviews were to be held in three post-primary schools: Jobstown Community College, Coláiste Dhulaigh, and Belcamp College. Twenty-nine students were selected as a potential comparison group in Jobstown Community College, nine were selected in Coláiste Dhulaigh, and seven in Belcamp College.

Consultation with Jobstown Community College revealed that only 20 of the 29 were still attending school and the parents of these 20 were sent consent forms. Only four consent forms were returned, and of these, only three of the parents agreed for their children to be interviewed. In Coláiste Dhulaigh, only 5 of the 9 students were still attending school, and of these, four consented to be interviewed, and one refused (despite parental consent being given). In Belcamp College, only 2 of the 7 were still attending, and both consented to be interviewed. Therefore, out of the 45 students initially identified as possible comparisons, only 27 were still in school, and of these, only 9 were interviewed.

Due to the surprisingly low response rate, another three schools were contacted (Killinarden Community School, St. Joseph's CBS, and O'Connell's Christian Brothers' Post-Primary School) to help increase the number of Dublin comparison interviews. In Killinarden Community School, 16 possible comparison students were identified, of which 9 were still attending and only 3 consented to be interviewed. In St. Joseph's CBS, one eligible student was selected as part of the comparison group, and consent was given. In O'Connell's CBS, 17 students were identified, of which 8 were still attending, and three of these consented to be interviewed. In total, 16 (12 males and 4 females) comparison group students were successfully interviewed in Dublin (Table 2.7).

Cork

In Cork, 6 interviews were planned. Three schools were selected (North Monastery CBS, North Presentation and St Aidan's Community College). Seven students were selected from St Aidan's, four from North Monastery, and six from North Presentation. Of these, only one student from St. Aidan's was still attending and he was interviewed. From North Monastery, only one of the four selected students was still attending and this student failed to turn up for interview, although parental consent was given. In North Presentation, four of the six students were still attending, of which three were granted parental consent and were interviewed. Therefore, a total of four interviews were completed in Cork, three females and one male (Table 2.7).

Dundalk and Drogheda

Ten interviews were planned in Dundalk and Drogheda. As the majority of early school leavers came from Dundalk, three Dundalk post-primary schools (Dun Lughhaigh Secondary School, St. Vincent's Secondary School, and O'Fiaich College)

were used for the comparison group interviews. In Dun Lughaidh Secondary School, four students were selected for interview, four consents were granted but only three interviews took place as one of the students was absent from school. In St. Vincent's, three students were selected and three interviews were completed. All six of the students from these two schools were female. At O'Fiaich College, 18 students were selected as part of the comparison group; however, only four parents granted consent and these four male students were duly interviewed. In total, 10 students were interviewed, six females and four males (Table 2.7).

Rural

From a potential comparison group of over 100, 10 students were selected in the Donegal area, from which six interviews were to be conducted. Of these ten, eight were still attending Carndonagh Community School. Seven consent forms were returned and six interviews completed, three males and three females, while the seventh student was absent on the day of interviewing. For the Galway area, there were eight students selected from a possible 100, with the intention of interviewing four of these. All eight were attending Scoil Chuimsitheach Chiaráin. Only four parents granted consent and the four interviews were successfully completed, two males and two females. Therefore, the required 10 rural interviews were completed, consisting of five male and five female students (Table 2.7).

In total, the required 40 comparison interviews were successfully completed. Of the 40 interviewees, 22 were male and 18 were female.

Table 2.7. Number of planned and completed comparison group interviews, by area.

Area	Planned Interviews	Selected comparison group	Still attending	Consent given	Completed Interviews
Dublin	14	79	45	16	16
Cork	6	17	6	5	4
Rural	10	18	16	11	10
Dundalk	10	25	20	11	10
Total	40	139	87	43	40

Teachers' Descriptions of Early School Leavers

Questionnaires about each of the 186 early school leavers were mailed to both the primary and post-primary schools they had attended. Principals or teachers who were most familiar with these ex-pupils were requested to complete the questionnaire. In total, 273 questionnaires were returned, 144 from primary schools and 129 from post-primary schools. Thus, primary school data were returned for 77.42% of the early school leavers, and post-primary data were returned for 69.35%.

School and Community Characteristics

The 186 early school leavers had attended a total of 35 different primary schools and 39 post-primary schools. Principals in these schools were mailed a questionnaire asking for information about the school and the community in which it was located. Twenty-eight (80.00%) primary and 27 (69.23%) post-primary principals returned completed questionnaires.

Instruments

Three main approaches were used in the collection of data. Firstly, a structured interview schedule was used with both early school leavers and those in the comparison group. The interview included questions on personal details and family background, experiences in primary and post-primary school, and employment history. For the most part, the same questions were asked of both groups, with the exception of the sections on school leaving and employment experience. Whereas early school leavers were asked what caused them to leave school, and about the consequences of their dropout, those in the comparison group were asked if they had ever considered dropping out of school, and why they had decided to remain. The early school leavers were asked about their employment history, attitudes towards employment, the perceived usefulness of their educational experiences and current means of support. Members of the comparison group were asked about current and previous employment.

Secondly, a questionnaire was used to collect data from primary and post-primary teachers about the characteristics of identified early school leavers. The primary and post-primary versions of the questionnaires were similar, and covered

behaviour in school, remedial and psychological help received, academic performance, attendance rates, suspensions, and parental interest in their child's education. In addition, the post-primary teachers were asked questions about the early school leaver's entry to school and reasons why he or she left school.

Thirdly, a questionnaire was used to collect data from principals about the characteristics of the schools attended by identified early school leavers. The questionnaire also sought information about the communities within which the schools were located. Both the primary and post-primary versions of the questionnaire asked about rates of absenteeism, attendance and dropout, remediation and psychological assessment in each school. Both versions also asked about general pupil characteristics and characteristics of the community in which the school was located. The post-primary version of the questionnaire asked about the type of programmes (such as the Leaving Certificate Applied programme) offered by the school.

3. Analysis of Early School Leaver and Comparison Interviews

A total of 94 individuals were interviewed: 54 early school leavers and 40 interviewees who formed a comparison group. Half of the early school leavers interviewed were from urban areas in either Dublin or Cork, 10 were from Drogheda or Dundalk, and 17 were from rural areas in either Galway, Donegal or Mayo. Half of the comparison group were from urban area of Dublin or Cork, 10 were from Dundalk, and 10 from rural areas of Donegal or Galway.

The interview included questions on personal details and family background, experiences in primary and post-primary school, and employment history. For the most part, the same questions were asked of both groups, with the exception of the sections on school leaving and employment experience.

Differences between the early school leavers and comparison group were examined in a series of chi-squared analyses. The results of the analyses will be reported only where differences were found to be significant. Statistical analysis was not possible on a number of questions due to lack of comparability of questions asked of the two groups, or the small numbers involved.

The responses of the early school leavers were also examined by gender and by location (urban, rural or provincial). However, as the number of cases involved when the data was divided in this way was so small, very few differences were observed. Therefore, the effects of gender or location will only be discussed where noteworthy.

Background Characteristics

The interview covered a number of questions on personal and demographic factors, including household composition, family background, parental education and employment.

Personal Characteristics

Early school leavers were marginally older (average age: 17.44 years) than those in the comparison group (average age: 17.25 years). A slightly higher percentage of the comparison group than of the early school leavers were 16- and 17-years of age at the time of interview (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and comparison group who were aged 16-, 17-, and 18-years at the time of interview.

Age	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
16	2	3.70	3	7.50
17	28	51.85	24	60.00
18	22	40.74	13	32.50
19	2	3.70	0	0.00

In the early school leavers group, 70.37% were male and 29.63% female. Forty five percent of the comparison group were female and 55.00% were male. The majority of interviewees (96.30% of early school leavers and 95% of the comparison group) had been born in Ireland. The four interviewees (two early school leavers and two comparison group) who had not been born in Ireland were born in England.

Family Size and Household Composition

Early school leavers had a significantly higher mean number of siblings than the comparison group (4.83 compared to 3.18, $t = 3.76$; $df = 92$; $p < .001$). Those in the comparison group were twice as likely as early school leavers to be oldest children (37.50% versus 16.67%, respectively). Conversely there was a slightly higher percentage of both youngest (18.52% compared to 15.00%) and middle children (64.81% compared to 47.50%) in the early leavers group (Table 3.2). There were no only children in either group.

Table 3.2. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group who were the youngest, middle, oldest and only child in their family.

Place in family	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Oldest child	9	16.67	15	37.50
Middle child	35	64.81	19	47.50
Youngest child	10	18.52	6	15.00
Only child	0	0.00	0	0.00

Both parents of the interviewees were alive in the majority of cases (92.59% of early school leavers and 92.50% of the comparison group). A small percentage reported that only their father was alive (three early school leavers and one of the comparison group) or that only their mother was alive (one early school leaver and two of the comparison group).

Interviewees were asked to specify who was living with them at the time of interview. The average number of people in the household (including the interviewee) was 5.52 among the early school leaver group and 5.00 among the comparison group. While the majority of interviewees lived with both parents, some differences emerged between the two groups. Just over half of the early school leavers (59.26%) lived with both parents, compared to over three-quarters (77.50%) of the comparison group (Table 3.3). Further, a higher percentage of early school leavers lived in a lone-parent household (29.63% compared to 20.00%). The majority of these lived with their mother (68.75% of early school leavers and 87.50% of the comparison group). However, five early school leavers, but only one of the comparison group, lived with their father in a lone-parent household. A higher percentage of early school leavers lived in some other type of household (8.26% compared to 2.50%). These included interviewees living with siblings, with a boyfriend, with other relatives, in prison and one who had no fixed abode.

Table 3.3. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group living with both parents, in a step-family, in a one-parent family or some other household composition.

Household Composition	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Both parents	32	59.26	31	77.50
Step-family	1	1.85	0	0.00
One parent family	16	29.63	8	20.00
Other	5	9.26	1	2.50

When analysed by location, some differences emerged between the early school leavers. In the provincial sample, only 30.00% lived with both parents, while 59.26% of the urban sample and 76.47% of the rural sample did so, however, the differences were not significant.

All of the interviewees were members of the settled community. When asked to specify the type of accommodation they lived in, a number of differences were revealed between the two groups, with a higher percentage of the comparison group (62.50%) than of early school leavers (45.28%) living in a private flat or house (Table 3.4). A higher percentage of early school leavers than of the comparison group lived in Local Authority housing (45.28% versus 37.50%, respectively) or in rented accommodation (3.77% versus none, respectively). Three (male) early school leavers

lived in other types of accommodation at the time of interview: two were in prison and one had no fixed abode.

Table 3.4. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group who lived in Local Authority housing, in rented accommodation, in private accommodation, or in some other type of accommodation.

Type of accommodation	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Local Authority house	24	45.28	15	37.50
Rented flat/house	2	3.77	0	0.00
Private flat/house	24	45.28	25	62.50
Other	3	5.66	0	0.00

Interviewees were asked if they had ever moved home. Just over one third (35.19%) of the early school leavers and half of the comparison group had moved home at least once. While the majority of those who had moved had done so only once (73.68% of early school leavers and 50% of the comparison group), a higher percentage of the comparison group had moved more than once. A quarter of the comparison group and 15.79% of early school leavers had moved twice, while a quarter of the comparison group and 10.52% of early school leavers had moved three or more times.

Characteristics of Family Members

The majority of interviewees (86.79% of early school leavers and 82.50% of comparison group) said that both their mother and father had been born in Ireland. When asked about paternal employment, a significant difference emerged between the two groups ($\chi^2 = 6.59$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). While a large majority of the comparison group (82.86%) said that their father was in employment at the time of interview, just over half (54.90%) of the early school leavers said that this was the case. There was a small difference relating to maternal employment: 41.03% of the comparison group and 36.00% of early school leavers said that their mother worked outside the home.

Based on the classification system used by the Central Statistics Office (1998), fathers and mothers were assigned to a social class on the basis of their employment. The scale ranges from 1 (highest) to 6 (lowest), with Social Class 7 as a residual category, which includes all who are gainfully employed but whose occupation is unknown or not possible to classify based on the information supplied. For example,

Social Class 1 includes professional workers, such as barristers and solicitors, while Social Class 6 includes unskilled workers, such as drivers' mates.

Tables 3.5 and 3.6 show the social classes to which fathers and mothers of interviewees were assigned. The spread across the categories is similar amongst the early school leavers and the comparison group. A total of 41.18% of fathers of early school leavers were unemployed compared to only 17.14% of fathers of the comparison group. Approximately one third of the fathers of interviewees in both groups (31.37% of early school leavers and 37.14% of the comparison group) were classified as Social Class 4 (skilled manual). The percentage of fathers in Social Class 1 to 3 (professional workers, managerial and technical and non-manual) was similar in both groups (11.76% of early school leavers and 14.28% of the comparison group). It is of interest that the percentage of fathers in Social Class 5 and 6 (semi-skilled and unskilled) is higher for the comparison group (20.00%) than for early school leavers (7.84%).

Table 3.5. Numbers and percentages of fathers in Social Class 1 to 7, as classified by type of employment. ¹

Social Class	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
1 – Professional workers	0	0.00	2	5.71
2 – Managerial and technical	4	7.84	2	5.71
3 – Non-manual	2	3.92	3	8.57
4 – Skilled manual	16	31.37	13	37.14
5 – Semi-skilled	4	7.84	6	17.14
6 – Unskilled	0	0.00	1	2.86
7 - All others gainfully employed and unknown	4	7.84	2	5.71
Father unemployed	21	41.18	6	17.14

A slightly higher percentage of the comparison group (64.00%) than of the early school leavers (57.50%) reported that their mother was not employed outside the home. Of those in employment, almost identical percentages of each group (4.00% of

¹ Three early school leavers and five of the comparison group were not asked the questions regarding paternal employment, as they either did not have contact with their father or he was deceased.

early school leavers and 5.00% of the comparison group) were assigned to Social Class 4 (skilled manual) (Table 3.6). Similar percentages of mothers of both early school leavers and of the comparison group were assigned to Social Class 3 (4.00% and 7.50% respectively) and to Social Classes 5 and 6 (26.00% and 27.50% respectively). None of the mothers of interviewees in either group was assigned to Social Class 1 or 2.

Table 3.6. Numbers and percentages of mothers in social class 1 to 7, as classified by type of employment².

Social class	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
1 – Professional workers	0	0.00	0	0.00
2 – Managerial and technical	0	0.00	0	0.00
3 – Non-manual	2	4.00	3	7.5
4 – Skilled manual	2	4.00	2	5.00
5 – Semi-skilled	8	16.00	6	15.00
6 – Unskilled	5	10.00	5	12.50
7 - All others gainfully employed and unknown	1	2.00	1	2.50
Mother not employed outside the home	32	64.00	23	57.50

Interviewees were asked if their siblings were currently in employment. The majority of interviewees who had an older sibling (88.89% of early school leavers and 84.00% of the comparison group) had at least one sibling who was employed³.

Interviewees were asked at what point their mother and father had completed formal education. A significant difference was found between the two groups for father’s education ($t = -3.101$; $df = 92$; $p < .01$). Just over half (53.70%) of the early school leavers did not know when their father had left formal education, compared to one quarter of the comparison group (Table 3.7). A higher percentage of the comparison group (32.50%) than of the early school leavers (11.11%) said that their father had, at a minimum, completed the Group or Intermediate Certificate. Excluding

² Four of the early school leavers were not asked the questions regarding maternal employment, as they did not have contact with their mother or she was deceased.

³ It was assumed, given the age of interviewees, that if their siblings were employed, they would be older than the interviewee.

those who did not know when their father had left formal education, 24% of the early school leavers and 43.33% of the comparison group said that their father had, at a minimum, completed the Group or Inter Certificate.

Table 3.7. Numbers and percentages of fathers who left education at various stages.

Stage at which father left formal education	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Did not know	29	53.70	10	25.00
Did not complete primary school	0	0.00	0	0.00
Completed primary school	16	29.63	9	22.50
Left before Group/Inter Cert.	3	5.56	8	20.00
Did the Group/Inter Cert.	2	3.70	4	10.00
Left after Group/Inter Cert.	1	1.85	4	10.00
Did the Leaving Cert.	0	0.00	3	7.50
Did an apprenticeship	1	1.85	1	2.50
Studied post-Leaving Cert.	2	3.70	1	2.50

Differences between the two groups for mothers' educational attainment were also significant ($t = -4.521$; $df = 60.7$; $p < .001$). Just under half (48.15%) of early school leavers, but only 20% of the comparison group, did not know when their mother had left school (Table 3.8).

Table 3.8. Numbers and percentages of mothers who left education at various stages.

Stage at which mother left formal education	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Did not know	26	48.15	8	20.00
Did not complete primary school	1	1.85	0	0.00
Completed primary school	17	31.48	10	25.00
Left before Group/Inter Cert.	7	12.96	5	12.50
Did the Group/Inter Cert.	2	3.70	6	15.00
Left after Group/Inter Cert.	0	0.00	3	7.50
Did the Leaving Cert.	1	1.85	5	12.50
Did an apprenticeship	0	0.00	1	2.50
Studied post-Leaving Cert.	0	0.00	2	5.00

A much higher percentage of the comparison group (42.50%) than of the early school leavers group (5.55%) said that their mother had completed a state examination. Excluding those who did not know when their mother had left formal education,

10.71% of early school leavers and 53.12% of the comparison group said that their mother had, at a minimum, completed the Group or Inter Certificate.

Quality of Family Relationships

Interviewees who did not live with their father (15 early school leavers and 5 in the comparison group) were asked how much contact they had with their father. Some differences emerged between the two groups. Almost half (7) of the early school leavers who did not live with their father said that they had a lot of contact, while 6 said that they had a little contact. In contrast, only one of the comparison group said that there was a lot of contact and another said that there was a little contact. Three (of 5) of the comparison group said that they had no contact with their father, compared to only two (of 15) of the early school leavers.

Interviewees were asked to rate their relationship with their mother and father⁴. The majority said that they got on either very well or quite well with their father (84.31% of early school leavers and 94.28% of the comparison group) (Table 3.9). A slightly higher percentage of early school leavers (7.84%) than of the comparison group (2.87%) said that they either did not get on very well or that they did not get on at all with their father.

Table 3.9. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and comparison group who got on very well, quite well, not very well, not at all with their father and mother, or were unsure.

How well do you get on with your father/mother?		Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
		N	%	N	%
Father	Very well	27	52.94	18	51.43
	Quite well	16	31.37	15	42.86
	Not sure	4	7.84	1	2.86
	Not very well	3	5.88	0	0.00
	Not at all	1	1.96	1	2.86
Mother	Very well	32	64.00	31	81.58
	Quite well	15	30.00	7	18.42
	Not sure	1	2.00	0	0.00
	Not very well	2	4.00	0	0.00
	Not at all	0	0.00	0	0.00

⁴ Interviewees who had reported that they had no contact with their father were not asked about the quality of their relationship.

The vast majority of interviewees also said that they got on either very well or quite well with their mother (94.00% of early school leavers and 100.00% of the comparison group), with only two early school leavers saying that they did not get on very well with their mother.

The quality of the interviewees' relationship with their siblings was also examined, by asking interviewees whether they got on with all, most, some, or none of their brothers and sisters. Differences between the two groups were very small: the majority (75.93% of early school leavers and 70.00% of the comparison group) said that they got on well with all of their brothers and sisters (Table 3.10). Approximately one-fifth (18.52%) of early school leavers and a quarter of the comparison group said that they got on well with most of their siblings, while approximately 5% of both groups said that they got on well with some of their siblings. None of the interviewees said that he/she did not get on with any of his/her brothers and sisters.

Table 3.10. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group who reported that they got on with all, most, some, or none of their siblings.

Extent to which interviewee got on well with their siblings	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
All of them	41	75.93	28	70.00
Most of them	10	18.52	10	25.00
Some of them	3	5.56	2	5.00
None of them	0	0.00	0	0.00

Just over one in ten (11.11%) early school leavers, but only one of the comparison group, had lived away from both parents when they were younger. Of the six early school leavers who had lived away from their parents, five had lived with grandparents or another relative and one had lived in a children's home. The interviewee in the comparison group who had lived away from her parents did not specify who she had lived with. Having run away from home was slightly more common among early school leavers: 16.67% had run away from home when younger, compared to 10.00% of the comparison group. All four interviewees in the comparison group who had run away said that it was because of arguments at home, either between their parents or between them and their parents. Early school leavers gave more varied reasons for running away. Four had run away because of arguments with parents, two said that they had run away to have fun, one said that he had missed his father, one did not want to disclose the reason, and one could not remember.

Primary School

Interviewees were asked a number of questions about their experiences of primary school, including their enjoyment of school, aspects they liked and did not like, favourite and least favourite subjects, experiences of bullying, problematic behaviours, attendance, remedial assistance, and encouragement to go to secondary school.

Satisfaction with Primary School

The majority of interviewees said that they had enjoyed primary school. Just under half (44.44%) of early school leavers and over half (55.00%) of the comparison group said that they enjoyed it very much while 37.04% of early school leavers and 35.00% of the comparison group said that they enjoyed it somewhat (Table 3.11). Almost twice the percentage of early school leavers (14.81%) as of the comparison group (7.50%) said that they either did not like primary school, or did not like primary school at all. Analysis of gender differences revealed that 25% of the female early school leavers, but only 5.26% of their male counterparts answered “Not at all”, when asked if they enjoyed primary school, although this difference was not significant.

Table 3.11. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and comparison group who said that they enjoyed primary school very much, somewhat, did not enjoy it, did not enjoy it at all or were unsure.

Would you say you enjoyed primary school?	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Very Much	24	44.44	22	55.00
Somewhat	20	37.04	14	35.00
Unsure	2	3.70	1	2.50
No	2	3.70	0	0.00
Not at all	6	11.11	3	7.50

Interviewees were asked to specify what aspects of primary school they liked. Over half of each group (59.26% of early school leavers and 57.50% of the comparison group) mentioned having lots of friends as something they liked about primary school, while approximately half of each group (48.15% of early school leavers and 55% of the comparison group) said that they liked most or all of the teachers (Table 3.12). That school was fun and involved lots of activities were each mentioned by just over one quarter of the early school leavers (25.93%) but by only 12.50% and 15.00% of the comparison group respectively. Sport was also mentioned

by a higher percentage of the early school leavers (11.11%) than the comparison group (5.00%). Similar percentages of both groups said that one of the things they liked about primary school was that the schoolwork was interesting (11.11% of early school leavers and 10.00% of the comparison group). However, while 10% of the comparison group said that they liked everything about primary school, only 3.7% of the early school leavers said the same.

Table 3.12. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group reporting various things they liked about primary school.

Positive aspects of primary school	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Having lots of friends	32	59.26	23	57.50
Most/all teachers were nice	26	48.15	22	55.00
School was fun	14	25.93	5	12.50
Having lots of activities	14	25.93	6	15.00
Schoolwork was interesting	6	11.11	4	10.00
Sport	6	11.11	2	5.00
Specific teacher was nice	3	5.56	1	2.50
Liked everything	2	3.70	4	10.00
Specific teacher liked/took an interest in interviewee	1	1.85	1	2.50
Most/all teachers liked/took an interest in interviewee	1	1.85	2	5.00
Was good at schoolwork	1	1.85	1	2.50

Interviewees were also asked to specify what they did not like about primary school. A similar percentage from both groups said that the things they did not like were a specific teacher (11.11% of early school leavers and 12.50% of the comparison group) and getting up for school (7.41% of early school leavers and 7.50% of the comparison group) (Table 3.13). For the comparison group, the most frequently cited negative aspect of primary school was that there was too much work (20.00%), whereas only 9.26% of early school leavers mentioned this as a negative aspect. In contrast, almost one tenth (9.26%) of early school leavers said that they could not understand things or that they were not good at school work, while none of the comparison group mentioned these factors.

There were also some differences in relation to bullying. One tenth of the comparison group, but none of the early school leavers, said that bullying was an aspect of primary school they did not like. Two early school leavers but none of the comparison group mentioned physical abuse by teachers, while three interviewees in the comparison group but none of the early school leavers mentioned that the rules were too strict.

Table 3.13. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group reporting things they did not like about primary school.

Negative aspects of primary school	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Didn't like a specific teacher	6	11.11	5	12.50
Couldn't understand things/wasn't good at schoolwork	5	9.26	0	0.00
Too much work	5	9.26	8	20.00
Didn't like most/all teachers	4	7.41	0	0.00
Getting up	4	7.41	3	7.50
School was boring	3	5.56	3	7.50
Disliked everything	3	5.56	0	0.00
Specific teacher disliked/picked on interviewee	2	3.70	3	7.50
Most/all teachers didn't like/picked on interviewee	2	3.70	0	0.00
Physical abuse by teachers	2	3.70	0	0.00
Being bullied	0	0.00	4	10.00
Having no friends	0	0.00	1	2.50
Rules too strict	0	0.00	3	7.50

Favourite and Least Favourite Subjects

Interviewees were asked what were their favourite and least favourite subjects.

Mathematics was the most popular subject among both groups – chosen by over one third (37.74%) of early school leavers and just over one quarter (25.64%) of the comparison group (Table 3.14). A higher percentage of the early school leavers group (26.42%) than of the comparison group (15.38%) said that English was their favourite subject. Irish on the other hand was more popular among the comparison group, with 20.15% saying it was their favourite subject, compared to only 7.55% of the early school leavers.

Table 3.14. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group reporting their favourite subject in primary school.

Subject	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Maths	20	37.74	10	25.64
English	14	26.42	6	15.38
Art and craft	5	9.43	2	5.13
Irish	4	7.55	8	20.15
P.E.	4	7.55	1	2.56
History/Geography	2	3.77	7	17.95
Music/Singing	1	1.89	3	7.69
E.S/Nature Studies	0	0.00	1	2.56
Other ⁵	3	5.66	1	2.56

Irish was reported as the least favourite subject by almost half of each group (45.10% of early school leavers and 47.22% of the comparison group) (Table 3.15). Almost one third (30.56%) of the comparison group, but only 17.65% of the early school leavers, said that Mathematics was their least favourite subject, while 9.8% of early school leavers but only one (2.78%) of the comparison group reported that their least favourite subject was English. Similar percentages of the early school leavers and comparison group said that Geography (7.84% and 11.11%, respectively) and History (5.88% and 8.33%, respectively) were their least favourite subject.

Table 3.15. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group reporting their least favourite subject in primary school.

Subject	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Irish	23	45.10	17	47.22
Maths	9	17.65	11	30.56
History/Geography	7	13.73	6	16.67
English	5	9.80	1	2.78
E.S/Nature Studies	3	5.88	0	0.00
P.E.	2	3.92	1	2.78
Other ⁶	2	3.92	0	0.00

⁵ Other favourite subjects were History, Geography, Cookery and P.E..

⁶ Other least favourite subjects were Art and Religion.

Interviewees were asked why a particular subject was their favourite. Although the majority of interviewees in both groups said that a particular subject was their favourite because they were good at it or it was ‘easy’, a higher percentage of the early school leavers (74.07%) than of the comparison group (57.50%) gave this as a reason. That a particular subject allowed them to use their imagination was given as a reason by over a quarter (27.50%) of the comparison group but by only one (1.85%) of the early school leavers.

Interviewees were also asked why a particular subject was their least favourite. The majority of interviewees from both groups said it was because the subject was too ‘hard’, or that they were not able to understand it. Almost three-quarters (70.37%) of the early school leavers and 58.57% of the comparison group said that they did not like a particular subject because it was too hard or they were not good at it, while 12.96% of early school leavers and 28.21% of the comparison group said it was because they could not understand it. Another 20.51% of the comparison group and 7.41% of the early school leavers said that a particular subject was their least favourite because it was boring.

Social Interaction and Bullying

Interviewees were asked to assess how well they fitted in at primary school. A large majority (approximately 95%) of each group said that they fitted in either very well or quite well at primary school (Table 3.16). Only 5.56% of early school leavers said that they did not fit in very well, while two (5.00%) of the comparison group said that they did not fit in at all⁷.

Table 3.16. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and comparison group who reported fitting in very well, quite well, not very well, and not at all in primary school.

How well do you feel you fitted in at primary school?	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Very well	20	37.04	18	45.00
Quite well	31	57.41	20	50.00
Not very well	3	5.56	0	0.00
Not at all	0	0.00	2	5.00

⁷ Both of the comparison group who said that they did not fit in at all in primary school also reported being bullied.

Several questions examined interviewees' experience of bullying in primary school. A significantly higher percentage of the comparison group (37.50%) than of the early school leavers (11.11%) reported being bullied ($\chi^2 = 9.223$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). Of those in the comparison group who had been bullied, a third said it had happened a lot, and two-thirds said it had happened a few times. In contrast, all of the early school leavers who had been bullied said it had happened only a few times. Interviewees were asked if they knew why the bully had picked on them. Approximately half of those who had been bullied did not know: three (of six) of the early school leavers and six (of 15) of the comparison group. Two of the early school leavers and one interviewee in the comparison group said that the person who bullied them picked on everyone. Those in the comparison group listed additional reasons for being bullied: five said it was because they were different in some way (typically, quiet or intelligent), two said it was because of a feature of their appearance (e.g. big ears) and one said that the older children bullied the younger pupils. One early school leaver said that she was bullied because she did not want to be friends with a particular child.

Of the six early school leavers who had been bullied, four reported that someone tried to stop them being bullied (two were helped by a friend and one each by a teacher or family member). Of the 15 interviewees in the comparison group who had been bullied, 13 reported that someone had tried to stop them being bullied (six were helped by a family member, five by a teacher and four by a friend).

Behaviour in Primary School

Interviewees were asked about their behaviour while in primary school. They were asked whether they had ever been suspended or expelled, how frequently they had engaged in a variety of problematic behaviours, and whether they were ever in trouble with the Gardai.

There was a large difference between the two groups in terms of being suspended from primary school. While none of the comparison group had ever been suspended, 16.67% of the early school leavers said that they had. Among the early school leavers, none of the rural interviewees had been suspended in primary school, while 29.63% of their urban and one (10.00%) of their provincial counterparts had been ($\chi^2 = 6.99$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$).

When asked why they had been suspended, over half (55.56%) said it was for messing in the class or yard, 22.22% said it was for smoking and 22.22% reported

some other reason (fighting, robbing from the school, or verbally abusing school staff). None of the interviewees reported having been expelled from primary school.

Interviewees were asked about the frequency with which they engaged in certain problematic behaviours during their last full year of primary school. Responses are summarised in Table 3.17. Significant differences were found between the two groups in relation to both getting into trouble with teachers and smoking.

Approximately 40% of early school leavers reported getting into trouble with teachers on a daily or weekly basis, compared to only 15.00% of the comparison group ($\chi^2 = 13.869$; $df = 4$; $p < .01$).

Smoking was also significantly more frequent among early school leavers ($\chi^2 = 11.318$; $df = 3$; $p < .05$). Almost one third (31.48%) of early school leavers smoked cigarettes either daily or weekly, compared to only 7.50% of the comparison group. However, smoking patterns among the early school leavers appeared to be linked to location. While 40.74% of urban and 50.00% of provincial early school leavers smoked either daily or weekly in primary school, only one (5.88%) rural early school leaver did so, although these differences were not significant.

'Messing' in class was more common among the early school leavers with 40.47% reporting messing on a daily or weekly basis, compared to 27.50% of the comparison group. A higher percentage of the early school leavers group (18.59%) than of the comparison group (2.50%) also reported having drunk alcohol while in primary school. Early school leavers also reported more frequent use. While 12.96% of the early school leavers reported using alcohol either daily or weekly, all of those in the comparison group who had drunk alcohol had done so only rarely. Alcohol use by early school leavers also varied by location, with three (30.00%) of the provincial interviewees reporting daily or weekly use, compared to 11.11% of the urban and none of the rural sample.

While only a small minority of the interviewees had taken illegal drugs or sniffed glue, the frequency of use was higher among the early school leavers. Three of the early school leavers and one of the comparison group reported having sniffed glue while in primary school. Two of the early school leavers and none of the comparison group, reported having taken illegal drugs while in primary school⁸.

⁸ Both of these were male urban interviewees who were in prison at the time of interview.

Table 3.17. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group indicating frequency of various problematic behaviours during their last year at primary school.

Behaviour	Frequency	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
		N	%	N	%
Acted up or messed in class	Daily	10	18.52	2	5.00
	Weekly	12	22.22	9	22.50
	Monthly	5	9.26	4	10.00
	Rarely	18	33.33	16	40.00
	Never	9	16.67	9	22.50
Got in trouble with teachers	Daily	9	16.67	2	5.00
	Weekly	12	22.22	4	10.00
	Monthly	2	3.70	7	17.50
	Rarely	23	42.59	13	32.50
	Never	8	14.81	14	35.00
Smoked cigarettes	Daily	13	24.07	3	7.50
	Weekly	4	7.41	0	0.00
	Monthly	0	0.00	0	0.00
	Rarely	5	9.26	1	2.50
	Never	32	59.26	36	90.00
Drank alcohol	Daily	1	1.85	0	0.00
	Weekly	5	9.26	0	0.00
	Monthly	1	1.85	0	0.00
	Rarely	3	5.56	1	2.50
	Never	44	81.48	39	97.50
Sniffed glue or other substances	Daily	1	1.85	0	0.00
	Weekly	0	0.00	0	0.00
	Monthly	0	0.00	1	2.50
	Rarely	2	3.70	0	0.00
	Never	51	94.44	39	97.50
Took illegal drugs	Daily	2	3.70	0	0.00
	Weekly	0	0.00	0	0.00
	Monthly	0	0.00	0	0.00
	Rarely	0	0.00	0	0.00
	Never	52	96.30	40	100.00

Interviewees were asked if they had ever been in trouble with the Gardaí when they were in primary school. None of the comparison group reported that they had been, compared to over one tenth (11.11%) of early school leavers. Half of the early school leavers who had been in trouble said that it was due to robbery, half had been in trouble for other reasons (violent behaviour, arson), and 16.67% had been in trouble due to vandalism⁹. A small percentage of early school leavers (5.56%) had appeared in the children’s court, in each case due to robbery. None of the interviewees had attended a school for young offenders.

Attendance

A number of items examined interviewees’ attendance in primary school – how often they missed school, the main reasons they missed days, and contact with School Attendance Officers or Gardaí.

Early school leavers reported missing days significantly more frequently than the comparison group ($\chi^2 = 8.411$; $df = 3$; $p < .05$) (Table 3.18). Chronic absenteeism (missing days a few times per week) was almost eight times more frequent among early school leavers than among the comparison group (18.52% versus 2.50% respectively). Reasonably regular absences (a few times per month) were also more frequent among early school leavers (37.04% versus 27.50% of the comparison group).

Table 3.18. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group who missed days a few times a week, a few times a month, rarely or never, while in primary school.

Frequency of absences	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
A few times a week	10	18.52	1	2.50
A few times a month	20	37.04	11	27.50
Rarely	22	40.74	26	65.00
Never	2	3.70	2	5.00

Interviewees were asked to specify the main reasons they had missed days in primary school. While the majority in both groups said that the main reason they missed days was because they were sick, a higher percentage of the comparison group (82.50%) than of the early school leavers group (64.81%) gave this as a reason (Table

⁹ Some of the interviewees reported more than one reason for having been in trouble with the Gardaí.

3.19). Early school leavers were significantly more likely to have missed days because they simply did not want to go to school, with 37.04% of early school leavers giving this as a reason compared to 12.50% of the comparison group ($\chi^2 = 7.087$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). Just under one tenth (9.26%) of early school leavers but none of the comparison group said that they had missed school because they were mitching¹⁰. Two (5%) of the comparison group reported missing days because they were being bullied at school, whereas none of the early school leavers gave this as a reason for their absences. Finally, one early school leaver reported being unable to get to school in bad weather, while another missed school to mind her siblings.

Table 3.19. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group giving various reasons for missing days in primary school.

Main reasons for missing days in primary school	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Illness	35	64.81	33	82.50
Did not want to go	20	37.04	5	12.50
Parents wanted help	6	11.11	3	7.50
Went on the mitch	5	9.26	0	0.00
Slept in/didn't get up	2	3.70	1	2.50
Being bullied	0	0.00	2	5.00
Other	2	3.70	0	0.00

In keeping with the fact that the early school leavers had missed school more frequently than the comparison group, a higher percentage of the early school leavers had been visited or contacted by the School Attendance Officer or Gardaí (Juvenile Liaison Officer). Almost one fifth (18.52%) of early school leavers, but only two (5.00%) of the comparison group had been visited or contacted by the SAO or Gardaí because they were not attending school. Visits by the JLO or SAO were significantly related to location. Half of the urban early school leavers had been visited by the SAO, while one (10%) provincial and none of the rural early school leavers had been visited by the JLO ($\chi^2 = 8.0272$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$).

Of the ten early school leavers who had been contacted, six reported that they had missed school a few times a week, two said that they missed school a few times a month and the same number said that they rarely missed school. Of the two

¹⁰ Mitching referred to staying out of school without parental permission or knowledge.

interviewees in the comparison group who had had SAO or Garda contact, one said that she had missed school a few times a month and one said that he had rarely missed school. Both of the interviewees in the comparison group and 70% of the early school leavers who had had SAO or Gardaí contact, had been contacted only once or twice. However, two (of ten) of early school leavers who had been contacted had had three to five contacts and one had been contacted or visited on five or more occasions.

Of the early school leavers who had been contacted by the SAO or Gardaí, 60.00% said that their parents had been angry with them, and half reported that their parents had tried to make sure they went to school¹¹. Forty percent said their parents had punished them, 20% said that they had been hit by their parents, and 10% reported that their parents had not been bothered. Of the two interviewees in the comparison group who had been contacted, one said that his parents had not been bothered, while one said that her parents told the SAO that a teacher had been bullying her.

Academic Achievement and Remedial Assistance

Interviewees were asked to assess how good they were at lessons in comparison with other pupils in their class during their last year in primary school. Significant differences were found between the two groups, with early school leavers more likely than the comparison group to rate themselves as below average in ability and those in the comparison group more likely to rate themselves as above average ($\chi^2 = 19.736$; $df = 3$; $p < .001$) (Table 3.20).

Table 3.20. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group who said that they were better than most at their lessons, about middle of the class, not as good as most, or that they were not sure.

How good were you at lessons in comparison with other pupils in your class?	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Better than most	6	11.11	17	42.50
About the middle of the class	34	62.96	23	57.50
Not as good as most	12	22.22	0	0.00
Not sure, don't know	2	3.70	0	0.00

The majority of interviewees said that they were about middle of the class (62.96% of

¹¹ Some interviewees gave a number of responses regarding their parents reaction to contact from the SAO or Gardaí.

early school leavers and 57.50% of the comparison group). However, early school leavers were far less likely than those in the comparison group to rate themselves as better than most of their class (11.11% versus 42.50% respectively). Just under one quarter (22.22%) of early school leavers believed that they were not as good at lessons as the rest of their class, while none of the comparison group believed this to be true.

In keeping with their perception of their own academic ability, a higher percentage of early school leavers had received remedial assistance when compared with the comparison group. Just under half (42.56%) of early school leavers had been in receipt of remediation while in primary school, compared to 25% of the comparison group. The majority of those who had received remedial help had enjoyed the experience (86.96% of early school leavers and 80% of the comparison group). Two of the early school leavers and one of the comparison group said that they did not enjoy it, while one interviewee from each group said that they were unsure or had mixed feelings about the experience.

Those who had received remedial assistance were asked to explain why they liked or disliked the experience. The most common responses were that they liked the teacher (39.13% of the early school leavers and 50% of the comparison group) and that they got out of class (39.13% of the early school leavers and 10.00% of the comparison group) (Table 3.21). Getting one-to-one attention, and being able to ask questions without feeling stupid were both mentioned by a high percentage of the early school leavers (34.78% and 17.39%, respectively) but by none of the comparison group. Two interviewees from the comparison group and one of the early school leavers said that they liked going to a remedial teacher because they did fun things.

Table 3.21. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and comparison group who specified various reasons they liked going to a remedial teacher.

Reasons why interviewees liked going to a remedial teacher	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Liked the teacher	9	39.13	5	50.00
Got out of class	9	39.13	1	10.00
Got one-to-one attention	8	34.78	0	0.00
Could ask questions without feeling stupid	4	17.39	0	0.00
Did fun things	1	4.35	2	20.00
Different teacher	1	4.35	0	0.00

The one member of the comparison group who had not enjoyed going to a remedial teacher stated that this was because the sessions were too long. Of the early school leavers who had received remedial assistance, two complained that it involved extra work, one did not like the teacher, and one did not like the fact that sessions were after school. Two early school leavers also mentioned issues relating to embarrassment, with one feeling it meant he was stupid, and another reporting that her classmates teased her because she was attending a remedial teacher. Similar percentages from the early school leavers group and the comparison group reported having been in a special class or school when in primary (7.41% and 5.00% respectively).

Numbers of Schools Attended and Incidences of Being Kept Back a Year

The majority of interviewees (84.91% of early school leavers group and 82.50% of the comparison group) had attended only one primary school, while 11.32% of the early school leavers group and 15.38% of the comparison group had attended two schools. Only two early school leavers and none of the comparison group had attended three schools.

Significant differences were found between the two groups in relation to being retained in a grade while in primary school ($\chi^2 = 6.294$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). Early school leavers were more than twice as likely as those in the comparison group to have been retained in a grade (42.59% versus 17.95%). Rural early school leavers were significantly more likely to have been retained in a grade than were their urban or provincial counterparts ($\chi^2 = 7.95$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$), with 70.59% being kept back a year, compared to 29.63% of urban and 30% of provincial interviewees.

Some differences were found between the two groups in terms of reasons given for being kept back in primary school. Over one third (40.91%) of the retained early school leavers and one interviewee in the comparison group (16.67%) said that they did not know why they had been retained (Table 3.22). Being too young was cited as a reason by 40.90% of retained early school leavers, while only one interviewee in the comparison group (16.67%) gave this as a reason for being retained. While two interviewees in the comparison group (33.33%) said that they had been retained because they had missed too many days, none of the early school leavers gave this as a reason. One interviewee in the comparison group said that he was retained because his school had a surplus of teachers in one year.

Table 3.22. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and comparison group giving reasons for being retained at a grade level while in primary school

Reason for being retained at grade level	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Don't know	9	40.91	1	16.67
Too young	9	40.91	1	16.67
Not up with the class	3	13.64	1	16.67
Missed days	1	4.54	2	33.33
Other	1	4.54	1	16.67

Table 3.23 shows grade levels at which interviewees were retained. Those in the comparison group had been retained either in Junior Infants (50.00%), in 1st class (25.00%) or in 5th class (25.00%). In contrast, the years at which early school leavers were retained were spread across the eight years of primary school, with almost a quarter being retained in Senior Infants (23.81%) and in 3rd class (23.81%).

Table 3.23. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and comparison group who were retained at grade levels, from Junior Infants to 6th class¹².

Grade Level	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Junior Infants	2	9.52	2	50.00
Senior Infants	5	23.81	0	0.00
1 st Class	1	4.76	1	25.00
2 nd Class	2	9.52	0	0.00
3 rd Class	5	23.81	0	0.00
4 th Class	1	4.76	0	0.00
5 th Class	3	14.29	1	25.00
6 th Class	2	9.52	0	0.00

Transition from Primary School to Post-Primary School

Two early school leavers (3.77%) left primary school before the end of 6th class (one during 5th class and one during 6th class), while, by definition, all of the comparison group completed primary school. A higher percentage of the comparison group

¹² Two early school leavers and three of the comparison group did not know the grade level at which they had been retained.

(92.50%) than of the early school leavers (79.63%) had been encouraged by someone at home to go to post-primary school. Interviewees were asked who had encouraged them to attend post-primary school. In most cases it was both parents (53.49% of early school leavers and 78.32% of the comparison group). Approximately one quarter (25.58% of early school leavers and 21.62% of the comparison group) had been encouraged only by their mother, while 6.98% of early school leavers and none of the comparison group had been encouraged only by their father. Just under one tenth (9.30%) of early school leavers and 18.92% of the comparison group had received encouragement from their brothers or sisters.

Interviewees were asked how they had been encouraged and the majority said that they were either expected to, or had no choice but to attend post-primary school (51.16% of early school leavers and 69.44% of the comparison group). Approximately one fifth of interviewees (20.93% of early school leavers and 16.67% of the comparison group) said that they had been told they would get a better job if they went to post-primary school. Only one early school leaver (1.85%) said that she had been encouraged not to go to post-primary school. She stated that her sister had told her she did not need to attend post-primary school. None of the comparison group had been encouraged not to go to post-primary school.

Post-Primary School

Interviewees were asked a number of questions about their experiences of post-primary school, including their experience of starting post-primary school, aspects they liked and did not like, favourite subjects, experiences of bullying, behaviour, attendance, perceived academic achievement and the characteristics needed to do well in school.

Experiences of Starting Post-Primary School

Similar percentages of early school leavers (44.44%) and of the comparison group (37.50%) reported that they found it difficult starting post-primary school. These interviewees were asked to specify what it was that they found difficult. Over one quarter (26.67%) of the comparison group said that they found starting post-primary school difficult because the buildings were too big, while none of the early school leavers gave this response ($\chi^2 = 7.131$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$) (Table 3.24). The most common response among early school leavers was that the lessons were too hard (45.63% compared to 20.00% of the comparison group). Having more than one teacher, and

friends going to a different school or class were each given as reasons by one third of the comparison group and 20.83% and 12.50% of early school leavers, respectively. Other reasons why interviewees found starting post-primary school difficult included: moving classrooms, the differences to primary school, being the youngest again, the number of pupils, being bullied, moving to a different area and hearing stories about beatings.

Table 3.24. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group giving reasons for finding it difficult starting post-primary school.

Reason why it was difficult starting post-primary school	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Lessons were too hard	11	45.63	3	20.00
Didn't like having more than one teacher	5	20.83	5	33.33
Meeting new people	3	17.65	3	20.00
Too many subjects	3	17.65	0	0.00
Too much discipline	4	16.67	1	6.67
Friends went to different school/class	3	12.50	5	33.33
Unfamiliar surroundings	2	11.76	0	0.00
Classes were too big	0	0.00	2	13.33
Building was big/scary	0	0.00	4	26.67
Other	10	41.66	5	33.33

Satisfaction with Post-Primary School

Interviewees were asked if they enjoyed post-primary school. Responses for the two groups were significantly different ($\chi^2=28.161$; $df=4$; $p < .001$), with interviewees in the comparison group more than three times as likely as early school leavers to report that they very much enjoyed post-primary school (62.50% versus 16.67%) (Table.3.25.). Just under one tenth (9.26%) of the early school leavers said that they did not enjoy post-primary school and over one quarter (27.78%) said that they did not enjoy it at all. In contrast, none of the comparison group reported that they did not like post-primary school.

Table 3.25. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and comparison group who said that they enjoyed post-primary school very much, somewhat, did not enjoy it, did not enjoy it at all or were unsure.

Would you say you enjoyed post-primary school	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Very much	9	16.67	25	62.50
Somewhat	19	35.19	12	30.00
Unsure	6	11.11	3	7.50
No	5	9.26	0	0.00
Not at all	15	27.78	0	0.00

When asked what aspects of post-primary school they liked, the most common response among both groups (40.74% of early school leavers and 57.50% of the comparison group) was having lots of friends (Table 3.26).

Table 3.26. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group reporting various things they liked about post-primary school.

Positive aspects of post-primary school	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Lots of friends	22	40.74	23	57.50
Lots of activities	15	27.78	5	12.50
Specific teacher	9	16.67	1	2.50
Most/all teachers	7	12.96	21	52.50
School was fun	5	9.26	6	15.00
Schoolwork interesting	3	5.56	6	15.00
Sport	3	5.56	2	5.00
Was good at schoolwork	2	3.70	2	5.00
Specific teacher liked/took an interest in me	1	1.85	1	2.50
Most/all teachers liked/took an interest in me	1	1.85	4	10.00
Liked different teacher	1	1.85	0	0.00
Facilities	0	0.00	2	5.00
Friends/other people	0	0.00	2	5.00
Everything	1	1.85	1	2.50
Having different classes	0	0.00	2	5.00
Other	1	1.85	5	12.50

Interviewees in the comparison group were over four times more likely than early school leavers to say that they liked most or all of their teachers (52.50% versus 12.96%) ($\chi^2 = 17.175$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$). In contrast, a significantly higher percentage of the early school leavers (16.67%) than of the comparison group (2.50%) said that they liked a specific teacher ($\chi^2 = 4.851$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). One tenth of the comparison group said that all or most of the teachers liked or took an interest in them, compared to only one (1.85%) of the early school leavers. A higher percentage of the early school leavers (27.78%) than of the comparison group (12.50%) said that they liked having lots of activities. Other aspects of post-primary school that interviewees liked were holidays, having different subjects, lunches, computers and the variety of subjects.

Interviewees were asked what aspects of post-primary school they did not like. Differences between the early school leavers and the comparison group were statistically significant for two of the factors. Over a third (37.05%) of early school leavers but only 10% of the comparison group said that they did not like most or all of the teachers ($\chi^2 = 8.835$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$) (Table 3.27).

Table 3.27. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group reporting things they did not like about post-primary school.

Negative aspects of post-primary school	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Most/all teachers	20	37.04	4	10.00
Too much work	11	20.37	8	20.00
Specific teacher	7	12.96	4	10.00
Couldn't understand things/I wasn't good at schoolwork	7	12.96	0	0.00
School was boring	6	11.00	2	5.00
Most/all teachers disliked/picked on me	5	9.26	1	2.50
Disliked everything	5	9.26	0	0.00
Long day/getting up	5	9.26	4	10.00
Rules too strict	4	7.41	3	7.50
Specific teacher disliked/picked on me	3	5.56	4	10.00
I was bullied	2	3.70	0	2.50
Bad teachers	2	3.70	0	0.00
Some students	0	0.00	3	7.50
Other	4	7.41	8	20.00

Just over one tenth (12.96%) of the early school leavers said that they could not understand things, compared to none of the comparison group ($\chi^2 = 5.602$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). Just under one tenth (9.26%) said that they disliked everything about post-primary school, compared to none of the comparison group. A similar proportion of early school leavers and the comparison group said that there was too much work (20.37% and 20.00% respectively) or that they did not like a specific teacher (12.96% and 10.00% respectively). Almost one tenth (7.50%) of the comparison group said that they did not like specific students, compared to none of the early school leavers. Other aspects of post-primary school that interviewees did not like were physical abuse, having less friends, crowds, being in a single gender school, lack of facilities (sport, library), travelling, rivalry, exams and school buses.

Favourite Subjects

Interviewees were asked whether they had preferred some subjects to others in post-primary school. Approximately one fifth of the interviewees (20.37% of the early school leavers group and 22.50% of the comparison group) said that they enjoyed most subjects. Only a small number of interviewees (two early school leavers and one of the comparison group) said that they did not like any subjects.

Table 3.28. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group reporting their favourite subject in post-primary school¹³.

Subject	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Practical	18	33.33	3	7.50
Mathematics	17	31.48	4	10.00
Languages	16	29.63	12	30.00
Creative subjects	6	11.11	7	17.50
Science	3	5.56	10	25.00
P.E.	6	11.11	0	0.00
Computers	2	3.70	4	10.00
Other ¹⁴	4	7.41	12	30.00

¹³ More than one response in relation to preferred subjects was allowed.

¹⁴ Other preferred subjects were geography, history, science, business organisation, accounting, and religion.

Some differences emerged between the early school leavers and the comparison group in relation to favourite subjects. A third of the early school leavers, but only 7.50% of the comparison group, said that they preferred practical subjects (Table 3.28) ($\chi^2 = 8.839$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). However, the difference was almost exclusively accounted for by male early school leavers, who were significantly more likely than their female counterparts (42.11% versus 12.50%) to list practical subjects as their favourites ($\chi^2 = 4.441$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$).

A significant difference was also found in relation to Mathematics ($\chi^2 = 6.112$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$), with a higher percentage of early school leavers (31.48%) than of the comparison group (10.00%) reporting mathematics as their favourite subject. A quarter of the comparison group, but only 5.56% of the early school leavers, said that Science was their preferred subject, and again this difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 7.290$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). A similar percentage in each group (29.63% of early school leavers and 30.00% of the comparison group) said that a language was their favourite subject. Other preferred subjects were Geography, History, Science, Business Organisation, Accounting, and Religion.

Interviewees were asked why a particular subject was their favourite. A chi-squared analysis revealed significant differences in relation to only one of the reasons given. One fifth of early school leavers said they preferred a subject because it did not involve reading, whereas none of the comparison group gave this as a reason ($\chi^2 = 7.033$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). The majority of interviewees (63.04% of early school leavers and 64.52% of the comparison group) said that they preferred a particular subject because they were good at it. Interviewees in the comparison group were over twice as likely to say that they preferred a particular subject because it was interesting or enjoyable (41.94% versus 17.39%), while early school leavers were almost twice as likely as the comparison group to say that they preferred a subject because it was practical (17.39% versus 9.68%).

Bullying

One fifth (20.51%) of the comparison group had been bullied in post-primary school compared to just over one tenth (11.11%) of the early school leavers. Three (of six) early school leavers who were bullied and three (of eight) of the comparison group reported that it happened a lot, while three of the early school leavers and five of the comparison group said that it happened a few times. Interviewees were asked if they knew why they had bullied. Three early school leavers but only one of the comparison

group said that the bully picked on everyone. One early school leaver and two of the comparison group said they were bullied because of their personal appearance. Two of the comparison group said that they were bullied because they were intelligent or not a troublemaker, while none of the early school leavers group gave this as a reason for being bullied. Other reasons given for being bullied included father's occupation, the interviewee's address, and because the interviewee had reported someone.

Interviewees were asked if anyone had tried to stop the bullying. Three (of eight) of the comparison group said they had been helped by teachers, compared to none of the early school leavers. In contrast, four (of six) early school leavers but only one of the comparison group said that a friend had tried to stop the bullying. Two of the comparison group and one early school leaver said that a family member had tried to stop the bullying.

Behaviour in Post-Primary School

Interviewees were asked if they had been suspended or expelled while in post-primary school. Early school leavers were significantly more likely to have been suspended than those in the comparison group ($\chi^2 = 8.849$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$), with half of the former having been suspended from school compared to only 20% of the comparison group. Location was significantly related to likelihood of suspension ($\chi^2 = 14.541$; $df = 2$; $p = .001$). Two-thirds of urban and 70% of provincial early school leavers had been suspended, compared to only 11.8% of rural early school leavers. There were no significant gender differences in rates of suspension among the early school leavers.

Of those who were suspended, the most common reason given was 'messing' (12 of 27 of the early school leavers and four of eight of the comparison group). Six early school leavers said that it was for mitching, whereas only one of the comparison group gave this as a reason. Two of the comparison group and three of the early school leavers reported having been suspended for fighting. Eight of the early school leavers reported having been suspended for insulting or hitting a teacher, while none of the comparison group gave this as a reason for suspension. Other reasons for suspension included not doing homework, leaving the school without a note, leaving school bag at home, and being late for school. Two early school leavers said that they were not given a reason for being suspended.

Significant differences emerged between the two groups in relation to expulsion, with 24.07% of the early school leavers having been expelled, compared to none of the comparison group ($\chi^2 = 11.175$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). As with suspensions,

location, but not gender, was significantly related to expulsions. None of the rural early school leavers interviewed had been expelled, compared to 40.00% of provincial and 33.33% of urban interviewees ($\chi^2 = 8.044$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$).

Of the 13 early school leavers who had been expelled, three said they had been expelled for messing while the same number said they had been expelled for fighting. Two early school leavers said that they were expelled for absenteeism, while one said that the teachers did not want him in the school. Other reasons given included setting off fire alarms and threatening teachers. Two early school leavers said that they did not know why they had been expelled.

Interviewees were asked if they had been in trouble with the Gardaí while they were in post-primary school, and if so for what reason. Early school leavers were three times more likely those in the comparison group to report having been in trouble with the Gardaí (25.48% versus 7.69%) ($\chi^2 = 4.789$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). Half of the provincial early school leavers had been in trouble with the Gardaí, as had 25.00% of urban and 11.76% of rural early school leavers, although this difference was not significant.

Three of the early school leavers who had been in trouble with the Gardaí said that it was because of robbery, while two said that it was because of vandalism. Other reasons given by the early school leavers included joyriding, drug dealing, drinking, assault, and non-attendance at school. Of the three interviewees in the comparison group who reported being in trouble with the Gardaí, one said it was for fighting, one had been carrying a knife and one had been caught in a stolen car.

Interviewees were asked about the frequency with which they engaged in certain problematic behaviours while in post-primary school. Responses are summarised in Table 3.29. There were significant differences between the early school leavers group and the comparison group for three of the six problem behaviours – getting into trouble with teachers, messing in class, and smoking.

Early school leavers reported getting into trouble with teachers significantly more frequently than did the comparison group ($\chi^2 = 14.828$; $df = 4$; $p < .01$). Over half (55.56%) of early school leavers reported getting into trouble with teachers on a daily or weekly basis, compared to 20.00% of the comparison group. Messing in class was also more frequent among early school leavers ($\chi^2 = 14.828$; $df = 4$; $p < .05$). Well over half (61.11%) of the early school leavers and only 27.50% of the comparison group reported messing on a daily or weekly basis.

Table 3.29. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group indicating frequency of various problematic behaviours during their last year at post-primary school.

Behaviour	Frequency	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
		N	%	N	%
Acted up or messed in class	Daily	18	33.33	5	12.50
	Weekly	15	27.78	6	15.00
	Monthly	6	11.11	5	12.50
	Rarely	11	20.37	16	40.00
	Never	4	7.41	8	20.00
Got in trouble with teachers	Daily	14	25.93	4	10.00
	Weekly	16	29.63	4	10.00
	Monthly	5	9.26	2	5.00
	Rarely	14	25.93	21	52.50
	Never	5	9.26	9	22.50
Smoked cigarettes	Daily	25	46.30	7	17.50
	Weekly	6	11.11	1	2.50
	Monthly	0	0.00	0	0.00
	Rarely	5	9.26	1	2.50
	Never	18	33.33	31	77.50
Drank alcohol	Daily	2	3.70	0	0.00
	Weekly	14	25.93	9	22.50
	Monthly	4	7.41	6	15.00
	Rarely	5	9.26	6	15.00
	Never	29	53.70	19	47.50
Sniffed glue or other substances	Daily	0	0.00	0	0.00
	Weekly	1	1.85	0	0.00
	Monthly	0	0.00	0	0.00
	Rarely	2	3.70	0	0.00
	Never	51	94.44	40	100.00
Took illegal drugs (e.g. E, hash)	Daily	3	5.56	0	0.00
	Weekly	2	3.70	2	5.00
	Monthly	1	1.85	0	0.00
	Rarely	5	9.26	1	2.50
	Never	43	79.63	37	92.50

Early school leavers reported having smoked cigarettes significantly more frequently than the comparison group ($\chi^2 = 18.129$; $df = 4$; $p < .001$). Over half (57.41%) had smoked cigarettes either daily or weekly compared to only 20.00% of the comparison group. All of the provincial early school leavers reported smoking on a daily or weekly basis, compared to 59.26% of their urban and 29.41% of their rural counterparts. Differences between male and female early school leavers in frequency of smoking were small. Only a small difference was found between the early school leavers and the comparison group in relation to alcohol use, with approximately one quarter of the interviewees (27.63% and 22.50%, respectively) reporting daily or weekly use of alcohol. Sixty percent of provincial early school leavers reported using alcohol at least weekly, compared to 25.93% of urban and 17.65% of rural early school leavers. There were only small differences between male and female early school leavers in the frequency of alcohol use.

Attendance

Interviewees were asked how often they had missed days in post-primary school. Early school leavers reported missing days significantly more frequently than the comparison group ($\chi^2 = 24.810$; $df = 3$; $p < .001$). Almost half of the early school leavers (44.44%) said that they missed days a few times a week, compared to only 5.00% of the comparison group (Table 3.30). Just under one third of both groups (29.63% of early school leavers and 30.00% of the comparison group) said that they missed days a few times a month.

Table 3.30. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group who missed days a few times a week, a few times a month, rarely or never, while in post-primary school.

How often did you miss days?	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
A few times a week	24	44.44	2	5.00
A few times a month	16	29.63	12	30.00
Rarely	12	22.22	26	65.00
Never	2	3.70	0	0.00

Interviewees were asked to specify the main reasons they had missed days in post-primary school (Table 3.31). Significant differences were found between the early school leavers group and the comparison group in relation to three of the reasons given. The reason most commonly given by the early school leavers was that they did

not want to go, which was mentioned by 40.74% of the early school leavers but by only 17.50% of the comparison group ($\chi^2 = 5.818$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). A significantly higher percentage of early school leavers (27.78%) than of the comparison group (7.50%) said that they had missed school because they were mitching ($\chi^2 = 5.266$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). In contrast a significantly higher percentage of the comparison group (82.50%) than of the early school leavers (38.89%) said that they missed days because they were sick ($\chi^2 = 17.878$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$). Other reasons given for missing school by the early school leavers included not wanting to go in for difficult subjects, laziness, and appearing in court. Other reasons given by the comparison group included sleeping in, attending open days and work, while one interviewee said she had missed school because her sister was terminally ill.

Table 3.31. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group giving various reasons for missing days in post-primary school¹⁵.

Main reasons for missing days in post-primary school	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Did not want to go	22	40.74	7	17.50
Was sick	21	38.89	33	82.50
Went on the mitch	15	27.78	3	7.50
Suspended	7	12.96	1	2.50
Parents wanted help	4	7.41	2	5.00
Friends persuasion	2	3.70	0	0.00
Other	4	7.41	5	12.50

Academic Achievement and Remedial Assistance

Interviewees were asked to assess how good they were at lessons compared to other pupils in post-primary school. While a majority of interviewees (65.38% of early school leavers and 67.50% of the comparison group) said that they were about middle of the class, a quarter of the comparison group but only one early school leaver said that they were better than most at their lessons (Table 3.32). A higher percentage of the early school leavers (26.92%) than of the comparison group (7.50%) said that they were not as good as most (Table 3.32) ($\chi^2 = 17.009$; $df = 3$; $p < .001$).

¹⁵ Some interviewees gave multiple reasons for missing days in post-primary school.

Table 3.32. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group who said that they were better than most at their lessons, about middle of the class, not as good as most, or that they were not sure.

How good were you at lessons in comparison with other pupils in your class?	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Better than most	1	1.92	10	25.00
About the middle of the class	34	65.38	27	67.50
Not as good as most	14	26.92	3	7.50
Not sure, don't know	3	5.77	0	0.00

Characteristics Needed to do Well in School

Interviewees were asked what they thought someone needed to be like to do well in school (Table 3.33). The most common response among both groups was that a person needed to be a hard worker (48.15% of the early school leavers and 42.50% of the comparison group). One third of the early school leavers and 27.50% of the comparison group said that one needed to be clever, while doing whatever the teacher said was mentioned by 25.93% of the early school leavers and 17.50% of the comparison group. A significantly higher percentage of the comparison group (27.50%) than of the early school leavers (5.56%) said that one needed to be determined or have a long-term view in order to do well in school ($\chi^2 = 8.730$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$).

Those in the comparison group were significantly more likely than the early school leavers (25.00% versus 1.85%, respectively) to say that one needed to be friendly and get on with others in order to do well ($\chi^2 = 11.916$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). Significantly more early school leavers than the comparison group (20.37% versus one) believed that one needed to be interested in books to do well in school ($\chi^2 = 6.590$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). Other factors mentioned included: ignoring peer pressure and standing up for yourself, liking or having an interest in school, doing some work, having a supportive family, staying out of trouble, being from a rich family or area, being lucky, being quiet, regular attendance, having a good teacher, being confident, having no social life, being adaptable, being mature, not getting stressed and having a good choice of subjects.

Table 3.33. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and comparison group listing various characteristics needed to do well in school

Characteristics needed to do well in school	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Hard worker	26	48.15	17	42.50
Clever	18	33.33	11	27.50
Do whatever teacher says	14	25.93	7	17.50
Interested in books	11	20.37	1	2.50
Ignore peer pressure/stand up for yourself	5	9.26	7	17.50
Like or have an interest in school	5	9.26	2	5.00
Do some work	4	7.41	1	2.50
From a supportive family	4	7.41	5	12.50
Stay out of trouble	3	5.56	0	0.00
Determined/long term view	3	5.56	11	27.50
From a rich family/area	2	3.70	1	2.50
Lucky	1	1.85	1	2.50
Get on with others/friendly	1	1.85	10	25.00
Listen to and respect teachers	1	1.85	4	10.00
Other	7	12.96	7	17.50

Leaving Versus Remaining in School

Early school leavers were asked several questions about leaving school including when and why they had left school, whether anyone had tried to stop them leaving school, whether they had been expelled, if they would consider going back to school, and how their parents and they themselves felt about leaving school.

Interviewees in the comparison group were asked if they had ever dropped out of school or considered doing so. If they had dropped out they were asked their reasons for doing so, how they and their parents felt about it and their reasons for returning to school. Interviewees in the comparison group were also asked to specify their reasons for staying in school after the Junior Certificate.

All interviewees were asked if anyone had tried to get them to leave school, if siblings and friends had left school before the Junior Certificate, and how they would react if in the future their child wanted to drop out of school.

Reasons for Leaving School

Early school leavers were asked to specify the last year of school that they completed. Less than one fifth (18.52%) reported completing third year, 42.59% reported completing second year and 31.48% reported completing first year. Two early school leavers had left post-primary school during their first year, one had left after primary school and one had gone to post-primary school for four months, then went back and repeated the last year of primary but had not returned to post-primary school.

When asked why they had left school, the most common response (given by half of the early school leavers) was that they had lost interest in study or in school (Table 3.34). This reason was given significantly more often by rural early school leavers (76.47%), than by their urban (37.04%) or provincial (40%) counterparts ($\chi^2 = 6.980$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$).

Table 3.34. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers giving various reasons for leaving school.

Reasons given for leaving school	Early School Leavers	
	N	%
Lost interest in study	27	50.00
Wanted money or a job	13	24.07
Expelled	11	20.37
Not able to keep up with studies	5	9.26
Didn't like teacher/teachers	4	7.41
Didn't like school	4	7.41
Not enough practical subjects	3	5.56
Illness	3	5.56
Friends were leaving	2	3.70
Possibility of failing exams ¹⁶	2	3.70
Problem with/hit by a teacher	2	3.70
Other	7	14.81

Almost one quarter (24.07%) of the early school leavers said that they had left school because they wanted money or a job, and 20.37% said that it was because they were expelled. Forty percent of those from provincial locations, and 25.93% of those

¹⁶ One early school leaver was told by the school he would fail his Junior Certificate while the other felt himself that he would fail.

from urban locations left school because of expulsion, whereas none of the rural early school leavers gave this as a reason for leaving school ($\chi^2 = 7.240$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$).

Just under one tenth (9.26%) said they left because they could not keep up with their studies. There was a relationship between location and leaving school because of being unable to keep up with studies, in that five rural early school leavers but none of their urban or provincial counterparts gave this as a reason..

Four (7.41%) early school leavers, all urban, stated that they left school because they did not like a teacher or teachers, while a further four early school leavers left because they simply did not like school. Other reasons for leaving school included: having a drug problem, mother wanting early school leaver at home to mind siblings, nobody wanting to teach the early school leaver, early school leaver moving to a residential home, and early school leaver being asked to sign a disciplinary contract with which he did not agree.

Early school leavers were asked if anything could have been done to stop them leaving school. The majority (69.81%) said that nothing could have been done, while 30.19% said that something could have been done. However, urban early school leavers were significantly more likely to state that something could have been done to prevent them leaving school ($\chi^2 = 6.347$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$). Almost half (46.15%) of urban early school leavers thought that something could have been done, compared to 10.00% of provincial and 17.65% of rural early school leavers.

Four early school leavers said that they would have stayed if someone had shown an interest in them or explained why they should stay, while two said that they would have stayed if Gardaí or the School Attendance Officer had followed up their case. Two early school leavers said that having been expelled from one school, they could not get into another school. Of these, one said that he should have tried harder to get his expulsion overruled and one said that if he had obtained a place in another school he would have co-operated. Three early school leavers said that the school could have done something to stop them leaving: one said that teachers could have been nice, one said that teachers could have given her more respect and one said that it was the school's fault for not helping him. One early school leaver said that if he had been given money he would have stayed, while one said that he would have stayed if he had been allowed to skip second year and one said his parents could have stopped him leaving.

Influence of Others

Early school leavers were asked if anyone had tried to stop them leaving school. Over half (61.22%) said that someone had and, of these, the vast majority (84.85%) said that it was their parents (Table 3.35).

Table 3.35. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers reporting that a parent, a teacher, a sibling, a friend or someone else had tried to stop them leaving school.

Person who tried to stop early school leavers from leaving school	N	%
Parent	28	84.85
Sibling	3	9.09
Friends	3	9.09
Teacher	2	6.06
Other	3	9.09

Just under one tenth (9.09%) said that a friend had tried to stop them, while the same percentage said a sibling tried to stop them. Only two early school leavers (6.06%) said that a teacher had tried to stop them leaving school. Others who had tried to stop the interviewees from leaving school were health board staff and members of the extended family.

Early school leavers were asked what had been said to them to try to get them to stay in school. Over half (55.17%) of those who had been encouraged to stay in school said that they were told they would have better employment prospects if they stayed. Three early school leavers were told that they needed an education and the same number were told that they would have to get a job if they dropped out. Two early school leavers were told that the Gardaí would be called if they did not go to school, while two said that their parents had tried to force them to stay in school. One early school leaver said that his parents would have liked him to stay on until the Junior Certificate and one said that her parents told her to go back to school. In one case a teacher came to the early school leaver's house to try to persuade him to return to school.

Interviewees in both the early school leavers group and the comparison group were asked if anyone had tried to get them to leave school. A similar percentage of both groups (9.43% of early school leavers and 7.50% of the comparison group) said that someone had.

Of the five early school leavers who said that someone had tried to get them to leave school, four said that it was a teacher, and one said that it was a friend. When asked what had been said to try to get them to leave school, one early leaver said that a teacher had written to his mother to say he should leave the school, and one said that a teacher had told him that he was to leave the school and that his mother should visit the school if he wanted to return. In the case of one early leaver, a teacher had spoken to the principal on his behalf, but the principal had stood by the decision to expel him. One early school leaver said that his friends had told him he would be better off out of school.

Of the two interviewees in the comparison group who said that someone had tried to get them to leave school, one said friends had tried to persuade her by saying that they had jobs and money, and one said that it was a builder who had offered him an apprenticeship.

Reaction to Leaving School

Early school leavers were also asked how they felt about leaving school. Just under half (45.28%) said that they were happy or not bothered that they had left, while 43.40% said that they regretted having left. Of the other early school leavers, one said that he felt it was the right decision at the time, one said that she was glad to be out of school but sad because she might have been able to get a better job if she had stayed. One early leaver said that it was not too bad once he got a job and one said that he would not have achieved anything in the school he was in. One early leaver said that she was glad to be free and successful in getting revenge on the teachers (by being accepted back into school after being expelled and leaving again after three weeks). One early school leaver was unsure how she felt about dropping out.

Early school leavers were also asked how their parents had reacted to them leaving school. Over half (51.85%) said that their parents were disappointed or unhappy about it, while 24.07% said that their parents had been unhappy initially but were fine about it now. Just over one tenth (12.96%) said that their parents were not upset by their decision or said it was their own choice. Of the remaining early school leavers, one said that his parents agreed that it was necessary due to his medical condition, while one said that his parents blamed the school not himself. One early school leaver said that her father had died and her mother was ill and coping with six children and therefore did not have time to concern herself with her daughter's

dropout. Two early school leavers said that they did not know how their parents had reacted and one said that he could not remember.

Parental reaction varied by location. Three rural and one provincial early school leaver reported that their parents were not bothered by the fact that they left school, whereas none of the urban interviewees reported this. Almost half (47.1%) of rural parents were described as being initially unhappy, but now satisfied with their child's decision to leave school, compared to 14.8% of urban and 10% of provincial parents.

Returning to School

Just over half of the early school leavers (52.83%) said that they would consider going back to school to get some qualifications. Almost half (44.00%) said that they would like to return to get better qualification, or a better job. One early school leaver said that he would like to return if there was a scheme that would pay him to do so, while one interviewee said that he would return if the right courses were offered. One interviewee said that she would consider going back to school because she had learnt nothing since leaving, and one interviewee had already returned and had received a number of City and Guilds certificates.

Just under half (47.17%) of early school leavers said that they would not consider going back to school and a variety of reasons were given. Just under a third (30.00%) said that they would not consider it either because they were happy earning money or were not interested in school. Two early school leavers said they would not consider going back as they were doing better things – one was attending Youthreach and one was gaining qualifications in glazing. One interviewee said there was no point as the Junior Certificate was of little use, while one said that it depended on what you wanted to do. One interviewee said that he had tried to go back but the school would not let him re-enrol, while one said that it had not occurred to him to go back. One early school leaver said that she would not return because she would not fit in at school; one said that it would involve too much work; while one said he had been totally turned off by one teacher.

Expulsion

Thirteen (24.07%) of the early school leavers said that they had been expelled. Of these, five had tried to get into another school. Two of the five interviewees had enrolled in another school, but one of these was expelled after two days, while the

other interviewee left because she did not like the people. One interviewee was told by several schools that they had no place for him, but he did not think this was true. One interviewee was initially told by a number of schools that there was a place for him, but when they contacted his old school the offer of a place was withdrawn. One interviewee said that the school he contacted never got back to him about the possibility of a place.

The majority (69.23%) of those who had been expelled said that someone had tried to help them get back to school. In the majority of cases (66.67%) it was a parent. One interviewee was helped by the School Attendance Officer and went on to do five subjects in the Junior Certificate with the Citywise¹⁷ project. One interviewee said that a teacher had tried to help, while one interviewee who was in care said that Health Board staff had tried to help.

Dropping Out Among the Comparison Group

The comparison group were asked if they had ever considered dropping out of school. Just under half (47.50%) said that they had. When asked why they had considered dropping out, wanting money, wanting a job, and losing interest in school were each cited as a reason by 26.32% of interviewees. Just over one fifth (21.05%) said that it was because friends were leaving school; 10.53% said that it was because they thought they would fail an exam; and the same percentage said that it was because they did not like a teacher. Other reasons given included not being able to keep up, bullying, not wanting to sit the Leaving Certificate, being in training, boredom during Transition Year, being offered work or an apprenticeship, being given a hard time by teachers, having a terminally ill sister, and becoming a father.

Only three of the comparison group said that they had dropped out of school, one for two months and two for a year. When asked why they had returned to school, one interviewee said that it was to do his Leaving Certificate; one said it was because his mother asked him to; and one returned because she had been working as a hairdresser but was allergic to the hair products. The three interviewees were asked how their parents had reacted to them dropping out. One said that her parents had been unhappy, one said that they were angry, while one said that his parents did not mind.

¹⁷ Citywise provides full-time educational opportunities for those who have no other education possibilities open to them. The project emphasises academic and social development.

When asked how they themselves felt about having dropped out, one interviewee said he was delighted, one said she was disappointed, and one was unsure how he felt.

Reasons for Staying in School

Interviewees in the comparison group were asked to specify the main reasons they decided to stay in school after the Junior Certificate. The most common reason, cited by 65% of the group, was that they needed the Leaving Certificate to get a good job (Table 3.36). Forty percent said it was because they wanted to go to third level education; 32.50% said it was because their parents wanted them to stay; 20.00% said it was because they liked school; and 7.50% said that it was because their friends were staying in school. Other reasons given included not wanting a job, not being able to get a job, doing well in the Junior Certificate, being too young to leave, wanting a good education, wanting the skills necessary to get a job, the availability of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, pressure from family, becoming a father, and not wanting to waste the three years of school already completed.

Table 3.36. Numbers and percentages of the comparison group giving reasons for staying in school after the Junior Certificate.

Reasons for staying in school	N	%
Need the Leaving Cert. to get a good job	26	65.00
Wanted to go to 3 rd level	16	40.00
Parents	13	32.50
Liked school	8	20.00
Friends were staying in school	3	7.50
Could not get a job	2	5.00
Other	11	27.50

Early School Leaving Among Friends and Siblings

Both groups of interviewees were asked how many of their friends had left school before the Junior Certificate examination. A similar percentage of both groups (24.53% of early school leavers and 28.21% of the comparison group) said that none of their friends had left school before the Junior Certificate examination (Table 3.37). However, a higher percentage of the comparison group (64.10%) than of the early school leavers (49.06%) said that a few of their friends had done so and a higher percentage of early school leavers (26.42%) than of the comparison group (7.69%) said that most of their friends had done so. Within the early school leavers, more

males than females (34.21% versus 6.25%, respectively) stated that most of their friends had left school without sitting the Junior Certificate.

Table 3.37. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group who reported that most, a few or none of their friends in school had left school before the Junior Certificate.

Number of friends who left before Junior Cert.	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Most	14	26.42	3	7.69
A few	26	49.06	25	64.10
None	13	24.53	11	28.21

Interviewees in the comparison group were also asked how many of their friends had left school after the Junior Cycle. This question was not asked of the early school leavers. Just under one third (30.56%) said that none of their friends had left after the Junior Cycle. Over one half (55.56%) of the comparison group said that a few of their friends had left, while 13.89% said that most of their friends had left school after the Junior Cycle. Having friends who had dropped out of school was reported by a higher percentage of the comparison group who had themselves considered dropping out (83.34%) than of the comparison group who had not considered dropping out (61.90%).

Interviewees in both groups were also asked if any of their brothers and sisters had left school before they sat the Junior Certificate examination. Responses are summarised in Table 3.38.

Table 3.38. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group who reported that all, most, some or none of their brothers or sisters had left school before the Junior Certificate.

Number of siblings who left before Junior Cert.	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
All	5	10.64	2	6.67
Most or some	20	42.55	5	16.67
None	22	46.81	23	76.67

A significantly higher percentage of the comparison group (76.67%) than of the early school leavers (46.81%) said that none of their siblings had left school before taking the Junior Certificate examination ($\chi^2 = 6.891$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$). Almost half (42.55%) of the early school leavers said that most or some of their siblings had left

school, compared to only 16.67% of the comparison group, while a higher percentage of the early school leavers (10.64%) than of the comparison group (6.67%) said that all of their siblings had left school before the Junior Certificate. Regarding gender differences among early school leavers, males were more likely than females to say that none of their siblings had left school before the Junior Certificate (47.37% versus 25.00%, respectively).

Attitude to School Leaving

Interviewees were asked how they would feel if in the future they had children who wanted to drop out of school. The majority of interviewees (74.07% of early school leavers and 87.50% of the comparison group) said that they would try to stop their child leaving school (Table 3.39). A higher percentage of the early school leavers (18.52%) than of the comparison group (10.00%) said that they would let them make their own decision. Rural early school leavers were significantly more likely to state that they would let their child make his or her own decision (41.18%) than were provincial (none) or urban (11.11%) early school leavers ($\chi^2 = 9.039$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$).

Just over 5% of the early school leavers said that they would not have a problem with their child wanting to drop out of school, compared to none of the comparison group. One early school leaver and one of the comparison group said that they would be disappointed, while one interviewee in the comparison group said that he would feel angry. One early school leaver said that she would advise her child to stay in school, one said that he would keep the child at school until he or she was 17 years of age, and one said that it would depend on the age of the child. One interviewee in the comparison group said that if the child had a good reason to leave school and something worthwhile to do he would support them, while another interviewee in the comparison group said that he would encourage the child to stay in school but would not want to see him or her unhappy.

A number of the interviewees based their response on their own experiences of school. One early school leaver, who had said that he himself would not have left school if he had been sent to a different school, said that if his child did not like the school he or she was in, he would move them to a different school. One interviewee in the comparison group, who had considered leaving school because he was being bullied, said that if the child was being bullied he would back him or her up.

Table 3.39. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and the comparison group saying how they would react in the future if they had children who wanted to drop out of school.

Reaction to a future child who wanted to drop out of school	Early School Leavers		Comparison Group	
	N	%	N	%
Try to stop them leaving	40	74.07	35	87.50
Let them make their own decision	10	18.52	4	10.00
Not have a problem with it	3	5.56	0	0.00
Don't know	2	3.70	1	2.50
Other	5	9.26	5	12.50

Employment Experience

Interviewees in both the early school leavers and the comparison group were asked about their employment experience. The early school leavers were asked about employment experience before and after leaving school, as well as current employment status and means of support. Interviewees in the comparison group were asked about whether they had a job at the time of the interview, and any previous employment experience.

Employment Experience Before Leaving School

Early school leavers were asked if they had a job before they left school. Only eight (all males) had, and of these four had worked during the school year. Regarding type of employment, three had worked in a bar or in the catering business, two worked as labourers or in a trade, one worked in a factory and one worked on a farm. Early school leavers worked an average of 18.63 hours per week and all said that they had enjoyed their job.

Employment Experience After Leaving School

Early school leavers were asked to specify what work, if any, they had done since leaving school. Just under half (46.30%) had worked as labourers, while 44.45% had worked in a factory. Over one quarter (27.78%) had attended a FÁS course or some other type of training, 18.51% had done bar or catering work, while 14.81% had worked in a shop. Other jobs included hairdressing, babysitting, kitchen porter, cleaner, leaflet distributor, and odd jobs. On average the early school leavers had

worked for 21.04 months, while the average time spent in any one job was 10.06 months.

Early school leavers who had changed or left a job since leaving school were asked to specify their reason for leaving the job. Just under one third (31.48%) reported having left a job because they did not like the job or their boss, while 29.63% said that they left because their contract was finished. Almost one fifth (16.67%) left because they were offered a different job, 5.56% left to start an apprenticeship or get into a trade, and 3.70% left to return to training (Youthreach). More than one in eight (14.81%) said they had been sacked. Other reasons given for leaving a job included wanting better wages, dissatisfaction with conditions (e.g. nightwork), having an accident at work, and employers not honouring agreements. Two early school leavers had to leave work due to illness, and one left because she became pregnant. Two early school leavers left their jobs when they were taken into custody.

Of the 25 early school leavers who did not have a job at the time of the interview, 60% had tried to get a job. When these were asked why they thought they could not get a job, six said that they needed qualifications, and four said that they were starting a job or expecting to get a job soon. Other reasons for not being able to get work included not having tried hard enough, wanting a well paid job, needing a good reference, and illness (one early school leaver had a kidney complaint and one suffered from panic attacks).

Over half (53.70%) of the early school leavers were in employment or doing an apprenticeship at the time of interview. Of these, 85.71% were working full-time. When asked how long they thought they would stay in their present job, half of those currently working said they hoped to remain in their present job for the foreseeable future, while 34.62% said their present job was only short-term. Almost one in six (15.38%) said that they did not know how long they would be in their present job due to job uncertainty.

Employment Experience Among the Comparison Group

When asked if they had ever had a job, the vast majority (90.00%) of the comparison group said that they had. Over half (52.78%) of these said that they had a job at the time of the interview, which took place during the school term. Of these, 42.11% were working in catering or bar work, 21.05% were working as shop assistants, and 15.79% were working in a factory. Other types of work included hairdressing, housekeeping, deliveries and working as a service station forecourt attendant. The average number of

hours worked was 17.68 per week, with 26.3% working 20 or more hours per week. The majority (84.21%) of those who were working at the time of the interview said that they enjoyed their job.

Of those who were not working at the time of the interview, over half (52.94%) said that they had worked at some point during the school year. The most common type of employment among this group was bar or catering work (35.71%), followed by shop assistant work and factory or warehouse work, each of which was reported by three interviewees (21.43%) in the comparison group. Other types of work included working as a sales representative, in a guest house, and in the construction industry. The average number of hours worked per week was 22.50. Again, the vast majority (93.33%) of these interviewees said that they had enjoyed the job.

Present Means of Support

Early school leavers were asked how they were supporting themselves at the time of interview. Just over half (51.85%) said they were supporting themselves by working (Table 3.40). Seventy percent (70.6%) of rural interviewees were supporting themselves by their current employment, as were 48.1% of urban and 30% of provincial interviewees.

Parents and unemployment assistance were each cited by 16.67% of early school leavers as sources of support, while 7.41% received money through participation in training courses or an apprenticeship. One early school leaver was supported by the Health Board and one was supported by her sister. Other sources of support included savings and holiday pay. Two early school leavers were in prison.

Table 3.40. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers who were supported by a job, parents, unemployment assistance, training or some other means.

Present means of support	N	%
Job	28	51.85
Parents	9	16.67
Unemployment assistance	9	16.67
Training or apprenticeship	4	7.41
Other	6	11.11

Relevance of Education to Work and Possibility of Returning to Training

Early school leavers were asked if they thought what they had learnt in school would be useful in the workplace. Half of the early school leavers said that it would not be useful, 40.74% said that they thought it would be useful, and 9.26% did not know.

When asked if it was important for them to have a job, the vast majority (81.48%) said that it was very important. Less than one fifth (14.82%) said that it was fairly important and only two early school leavers (3.70%) said that it was not important for them to be employed.

The majority (80.77%) of early school leavers said that they would be willing to do courses to help them to get a job or a better job. Of these, almost half (47.73%) said that they would consider doing a FÁS or Youthreach course, and 43.73% said they would be willing to do an apprenticeship (Table 3.41). Just over one fifth (22.73%) said they would be willing to return to school and 9.09% said they would be willing to do a computer course. Other courses that the early school leavers said they would be willing to do included woodwork, hairdressing, secretarial work, and construction. One early school leaver said she would like to do an evening course, while one said he was willing to do any course that would keep him out of prison.

Although there were no significant gender differences in willingness to do courses in general, some differences arose in the type of courses the early school leavers were prepared to do. Just over half (53.1%) of male, but only 16.7% of female early school leavers mentioned that they would be willing to do an apprenticeship ($\chi^2 = 4.728$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). Finally, two-thirds of provincial interviewees and 25% of urban interviewees were willing to go back to school to gain qualifications, whereas none of the rural interviewees were prepared to do so ($\chi^2 = 10.784$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$).

Table 3.41. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers who would be willing to various types of training to help them get a better job.

Type of course	Early School Leavers	
	N	%
School	10	22.73
Apprenticeship	19	43.18
FÁS/Youthreach	21	47.73
Computers	4	9.09
Other	5	11.36

Summary

Seventy percent of the early school leavers were male. Early school leavers had significantly more siblings than those in the comparison group, and a greater percentage lived in a lone-parent family, but the difference was not significant. Early leavers were more likely than those in the comparison group to have an unemployed father, less likely to know the level of education attained by their parents and more likely to have parents who left school without taking any state examinations.

A large majority of early school leavers reported enjoying primary school, while fewer reported enjoying post-primary school. Early school leavers were less likely to be bullied, more likely to be suspended, to get in trouble with teachers, to smoke, and to miss days than were those in the comparison group, during primary school. They were also more likely to rate themselves as below average in terms of academic ability and to have been retained at a grade level during primary school.

Early leavers were significantly more likely to report that they did not like most or all of the teachers, or that they could not understand things in post-primary school. They were more likely to be suspended or expelled, to get into trouble with teachers and the Gardaí, to smoke, to mess in class, to drink alcohol, and to miss more days than were the comparison group. Early school leavers were significantly more likely than those in the comparison group to rate themselves as below average at their lessons post-primary school.

The most common reason given for dropping out was a loss of interest in school. Urban early school leavers were significantly more likely to state that something could have been done to keep them in school, for example, someone taking an interest in them. The majority of early school leavers reported that someone (mainly their parents) had tried to prevent them from dropping out. Half reported that they would consider returning to school for some qualifications.

Over half of the early school leavers were employed or doing an apprenticeship at the time of interview. Half of the early school leavers stated that what they had learned in school would not be useful in the workplace. Of those who were willing to do a course to help them get a better job, less than one quarter were willing to return to school, while approximately half were willing to do a FÁS or Youthreach course.

4. Teachers' Descriptions of Early School Leavers' Characteristics

Questionnaires about each identified early school leaver were sent to both the primary and post-primary schools they had attended. Principals or teachers who were most familiar with these ex-pupils were requested to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaires covered the topics of: behaviour in school, remedial and psychological help received, academic performance, attendance rates, suspensions, and parental interest in their child's education. In addition, the post-primary questionnaire also covered the topics of entry to school and reasons why the individual left the school.

In total, 273 questionnaires were returned, 144 from primary schools and 129 from post-primary schools. In reporting the results, the percentages and sample sizes (n) represent the valid cases for each question. This chapter summarizes the responses, and where possible the characteristics of the early school leavers as described by primary and post-primary school teachers are presented together. Significant differences between the early school leavers, by gender or location, will be reported.

Entry to School

Post-primary school teachers were asked whether the early school leaver took an entrance exam for the school and how s/he was assigned to a class upon enrolment.

Entrance Exam

The vast majority of early school leavers (92.13%) completed an entrance exam before enrolling in a post-primary school. A standardised English test (such as the Schonell Spelling Test, the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability, or the Gap Reading Comprehension Test) was used to examine 51.28% of the early school leavers, while 29.91% were given a school-developed English test. A standardised Mathematics test, primarily the Vernon Millar Maths Test, was taken by 23.93%, and a further 30.77% took a school-developed Mathematics test. Only 12.82% were given a school-developed Irish test. A large percentage of the early school leavers (67.52%) were also given some other form of test before entering the school. These primarily consisted of the AH series of general reasoning tests, and one individual was given an unnamed aptitude test.

Teachers were asked how the early school leavers performed on these tests. The level of information supplied was extremely varied, and it was not possible to interpret some of the responses. Those that could be interpreted were re-coded as either below average, average, or above average. For example, those whose reading age on a standardised reading test was scored as within two years of their chronological age were coded as average. Each student who had taken more than one type of entrance test was then assigned an overall rating. For example, a student who scored below average on a standardised Mathematics and Reading test, and average on a school-devised Irish test would be assigned an overall rating of below average. This may seem a rather crude method of grouping scores, and open to interpretation. However, in practice, students fell clearly into one or other of the three broad categories. Also, given the very mixed quality of the information supplied, more precise groupings were not possible.

As can be seen in Table 4.1, 75.68% of the early school leavers were categorised as below average on these tests, 21.62% were categorised as average, while only three were categorised as above average.

Table 4.1. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers who obtained below average, average, and above average scores on entrance exams to post-primary school.

Performance Level	N	%
Below average	84	75.68
Average	24	21.62
Above average	3	2.70

Teachers reported that information from the relevant primary school was obtained for 81.60% of the early school leavers. There was a significant difference by location of school, with 97.73% of teachers in provincial areas and 84.13% of teachers in urban areas reporting having received information from primary school, compared to only 33.33% of rural teachers ($\chi^2 = 35.82$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$). Information primarily consisted of academic performance details (62.38% of cases), classroom behaviour (58.42%), family background (27.72%), or attendance information (14.85%).

Class Assignment

Teachers reported that 58.27% of the early school leavers were assigned to an ability grouped or streamed class upon entry into second level education (Table 4.2). A further 24.41% were placed in a remedial class, while 16.53% were assigned to a

mixed ability class. Only one individual (0.79%) was assigned to some other type of class (a pre-first year class). Sufficient information was not received to allow interpretation of the ability group to which early school leavers were assigned.

Table 4.2. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers assigned to ability grouped / streamed class, mixed ability class, remedial class, or other type of class upon enrolment in post-primary school.

Class Type	N	%
Ability grouped / streamed	74	58.27
Remedial	31	24.41
Mixed ability	21	16.53
Other	1	0.79

Behaviour in School

Both primary and post-primary teachers were asked to rate 17 aspects of the early school leavers' behaviour during their time in school. For reporting purposes the behaviours are summarised under four headings: Classroom Behaviour, Interaction with Others, Aggressive Behaviour, and Other Behaviour. Teachers were also asked if the early school leavers displayed any particular problems while in school and if so, what these were.

Classroom Behaviour

When asked whether the early school leaver paid attention in class, primary school teachers rated 44.20% of early school leavers as having done so, and 44.93% as not having done so. Post-primary school teachers rated 33.33% of early school leavers as having paid attention in class and 53.85% as not having done so (Table 4.3). Primary school teachers were unsure if 10.87% of early school leavers had paid attention in class, while post-primary teachers were unsure in 12.82% of cases.

A significantly higher percentage of female early school leavers (55.00%) than of male early school leavers (35.90%) were reported by primary school teachers as having paid attention in class. Significant differences were also found by location in the percentage of post-primary teachers who reported early school leavers as having paid attention in class ($\chi^2 = 14.26$; $df = 4$; $p < .01$). Teachers in urban areas reported that 60.71% of early school leavers had not paid attention, while teachers in provincial areas said the same of 56.82% of early school leavers. In contrast, teachers in rural areas reported that only 23.53% of early school leavers had not paid attention.

Primary school teachers rated 63.89% of early school leavers as having been well behaved and 31.94% as not having been so. Post-primary school teachers reported that 42.86% of the early school leavers were well behaved in class and 47.90% were not. Primary school teachers were unsure if 4.17% of early school leavers had been well behaved in class, while post-primary teachers were unsure in 9.24% of cases. Significant differences were found by location in the percentage of post-primary teachers who reported early school leavers as well behaved in class ($\chi^2 = 14.47$; $df = 4$; $p < .01$). Teachers in urban areas reported that 52.63% of early school leavers were not well behaved, while teachers in provincial areas said the same of 54.55% of early school leavers. In contrast, teachers in rural areas reported that only 16.67% of early school leavers were not well behaved. There was also a significant difference between male and female early school leavers, with a higher percentage of male early school leavers (59.15%) than of female early school leavers (31.25%) reported by post-primary teachers as not well behaved ($\chi^2 = 10.52$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$).

As can be seen from Table 4.3, a higher percentage of early school leavers were rated as having taken part in class discussions or activities by primary school teachers (43.66%) than by post-primary school teachers (34.78%). A similar percentage were rated by primary and post-primary teachers as not having taken part in class discussions (43.66% and 41.74%, respectively), while primary teachers were unsure of 12.68% and post-primary teachers were unsure of 23.48% of cases.

Table 4.3. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers rated by primary and post-primary school teachers as having displayed various classroom behaviours.

Classroom Behaviour	Primary		Post-primary	
	N	%	N	%
Paid attention in class	61	44.20	39	33.33
Well-behaved in class	92	63.89	51	42.86
Took part in class activities	62	43.66	40	34.78

Interaction with others

When asked if the early school leavers got on well with their classmates, primary school teachers indicated that 66.43% had done so, while 21.68% had not. Post-primary teachers reported that 47.50% of the early school leavers had got on well with their classmates and 20.83% had not (Table 4.4). Primary school teachers were unsure for 11.89%, while post-primary teachers were unsure for 31.67% of cases. Significant

differences were found in the percentage of early school leavers reported by post-primary teachers in urban, provincial and rural areas as getting on well with their classmates. The majority of early school leavers were reported by teachers in rural areas as getting on with classmates, compared to 50.00% of early school leavers in provincial areas and only 36.84% of early school leavers in urban areas. No significant differences were found in the percentage of male and female early school leavers reported as not getting on with classmates.

Primary school teachers reported that 29.79% of early school leavers were shy or introverted and post-primary school teachers indicated that this was true of 23.33%. The majority of teachers in both primary and post-primary reported that the early school leavers were not shy or introverted (65.25% and 57.50%, respectively). Primary school teachers were unsure about 4.96%, while post-primary teachers were unsure for 19.17% of cases. There were significant differences between the percentage of early school leavers in urban, provincial and rural areas reported by primary school teachers as shy or introverted ($\chi^2 = 15.11$; $df = 4$; $p < .001$). The majority (61.11%) of early school leavers in rural areas were reported as shy or introverted, compared to 27.38% in urban areas and 20.51% in provincial areas. There was also a significant difference between the percentage of male early school leavers (67.6%) and of female early school leavers (42.86%) who were reported by post-primary teachers as not being shy or introverted ($\chi^2 = 9.11$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$).

Primary school teachers rated 37.50% of the early school leavers as dependent or easily led and 44.44% as not having been so. Their post-primary school counterparts reported that 26.72% of early school leavers were dependent or easily-led and 39.66% were not. Primary school teachers were unsure about 18.06% of the early school leavers, while the post-primary teachers were unsure for 33.62% of cases.

Both sets of teachers rated early school leavers similarly on self-confidence. The primary school teachers rated just 20.00% of early school leavers as being self-confident, while 60.00% were not rated as being so. Post-primary teachers rated 15.57% as self-confident, and 56.56% as not being so. Primary school teachers were unsure about 20.00%, while post-primary teachers were unsure for 27.87% of cases.

Table 4.4. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers rated by primary and post-primary teachers as having displayed various patterns of interaction with others.

Interaction with others	Primary		Post-primary	
	N	%	N	%
Got on well with classmates	95	66.43	57	47.50
Was introverted / shy	42	29.79	28	23.33
Was dependent / easily led	54	37.50	31	26.72
Was self-confident	28	20.00	19	15.57

Aggressive Behaviour

Teachers were questioned about aggressive behaviour by the early school leavers (Table 4.5). Primary school teachers reported that 19.15% of the early school leavers had engaged in bullying behaviour and 70.21% had not done so. Post-primary teachers reported that 25.00% of the early school leavers had engaged in such behaviour, while 55.00% had not. Primary teachers were unsure about 10.64% of cases, while post-primary teachers were unsure of 20.00%. A significantly higher percentage of early school leavers in provincial (36.36%) and urban areas (22.81%) than early school leavers in rural areas (5.26%) were reported by post-primary school teachers as having engaged in bullying behaviours ($\chi^2 = 10.94$; $df = 4$; $p < .05$). Significantly more male early school leavers than female early school leavers were reported as having bullied others by both primary (25.93% versus 10.00, $\chi^2 = 5.90$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$) and post-primary teachers (34.72% versus 10.42%, $\chi^2 = 10.51$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$).

Primary school teachers reported that 4.26% of early school leavers had threatened a member of staff, while the post-primary teachers indicated that 20.3% had done so (Table 4.5). The majority of early school leavers had not engaged in such behaviour according to teachers in both primary and post-primary schools (91.49% and 70.34%, respectively). Primary teachers were unsure whether 4.26% of the early school leavers had threatened a teacher and post-primary teachers were unsure of 9.32% of cases. A significantly higher percentage of male early school leavers than of female early school leavers were reported as having threatened one or more of the teaching staff in both primary (7.41% versus none of the female early school leavers, $\chi^2 = 9.72$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$) and post-primary (28.99% versus 8.16%, $\chi^2 = 10.84$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$).

Primary school teachers rated 59.86% of the early school leavers as well-behaved during break time and in the schoolyard, while 28.87% were rated as not being so. Post-primary school teachers rated 47.32% of the early school leavers as well-behaved during breaks, and 36.61% as not being so. Primary teachers were unsure for 11.27% of cases, while post-primary teachers were unsure about 16.07%. Significant differences were found by location in the percentage of early school leavers reported by post-primary teachers as being well behaved during breaks and in the school yard ($\chi^2 = 12.39$; $df = 4$; $p < .01$). Just over one third (37.21%) of early school leavers in provincial areas, and 43.14% of early school leavers in urban areas were reported as having been well behaved, in contrast to 83.33% of the early school leavers in rural areas. Male early school leavers were also significantly more likely than female early school leavers to be reported by post-primary teachers as not having been well behaved during breaks and in the school yard (53.03% compared to 13.04%, $\chi^2 = 18.68$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$).

Table 4.5. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers rated by primary and post-primary school teachers as having displayed various types of aggressive behaviour.

General Behaviour	Primary		Post-primary	
	N	%	N	%
Engaged in bullying behaviour	27	19.15	30	25.00
Threatened member of the teaching staff	6	4.26	24	20.34
Behaved well at break / in school yard	85	59.86	53	47.32

Other Behaviour

Over one quarter (26.76%) of early school leavers were rated by primary school teachers as having worked hard while at school, while 57.75% were rated as not having done so (Table 4.6). Post-primary teachers rated only 15.70% of early school leavers as having worked hard, and 71.07% as not having done so. Teachers in primary school were unsure whether 15.49% of the early school leavers worked hard in school and post-primary teachers were unsure about 13.22% of cases. A significantly higher percentage of male early school leavers than of female early school leavers were reported by teachers as not having worked hard in both primary

(65.43% versus 47.54%, $\chi^2 = 11.13$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$) and post-primary school (81.69% versus 56.00%, $\chi^2 = 9.84$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$).

A higher percentage of early school leavers were rated as having an enquiring mind by primary school teachers (18.44%) than by post-primary school teachers (9.17%). The majority were rated by both primary and post-primary teachers as not having an enquiring mind (68.09% and 57.50%, respectively). Primary teachers were unsure of 13.48% of cases and post-primary teachers were unsure of 33.33%. A significantly higher percentage of early school leavers in urban areas (70.18%) than in rural areas (57.89%) and provincial areas (40.91%) were reported by post-primary teachers as not having had an enquiring mind ($\chi^2 = 10.01$; $df = 4$; $p < .05$).

Table 4.6. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers rated by primary and post-primary teachers as having displayed various other behaviours.

Interest in School	Primary		Post-primary	
	N	%	N	%
Worked hard	38	26.76	19	15.70
Had an enquiring mind	26	18.44	11	9.17
Had leadership qualities	10	7.04	7	5.83
Was creative	34	23.94	16	13.68
Engaged in sport	61	43.57	19	16.24
Enjoyed being in school	44	31.43	15	12.50
Was bullied by others	7	4.96	11	9.17

In terms of leadership qualities, 7.04% of early school leavers were rated by primary school teachers as displaying such traits, compared to 5.83% by post-primary teachers (Table 4.6). The majority of early school leavers were rated by both primary and post-primary teachers as not having displayed such traits (75.35% and 67.50%, respectively). Primary teachers were unsure of 17.61% of cases and post-primary teachers were unsure of 26.67%.

Primary school teachers reported that 23.94% of the early school leavers were creative, 53.52% were not, and they were unsure of 22.54%. In comparison, 13.68% were rated as creative by post-primary school teachers, 35.04% were rated as not, and they were unsure about 51.28% of the early school leavers.

With regard to engaging in sport, 43.57% of the early school leavers were rated by primary school teachers as having done so and 39.29% were rated as not having done so. Post-primary teachers rated 16.24% of early school leavers as having

engaged in sport and 52.99% as not having done so. Primary school teachers were unsure of 17.14% of the early school leavers, while post-primary teachers were unsure about 30.77% of cases. A significantly higher percentage of early school leavers in rural areas (36.84%) than in urban areas (16.67%) and provincial areas (6.82%) were reported by post-primary teachers as having engaged in sport ($\chi^2 = 16.94$; $df = 4$; $p < .001$). A significantly higher percentage of male early school leavers (than of female early school leavers were reported as having engaged in sport in both primary (53.09% versus 30.51%, $\chi^2 = 10.01$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$) and post-primary (20.29% versus 10.42%, $\chi^2 = ; df = 1$; $p < .05$).

The percentage of early school leavers rated by primary school teachers as having enjoyed being in school was 31.43%, while 34.29% were rated as not having done so. Post-primary teachers, in comparison, rated 12.50% of early school leavers as having enjoyed school, and 58.33% as not having done so. Primary school teachers were unsure about 34.29% of cases and post-primary teachers were unsure of 29.17%. A significantly higher percentage of male early school leavers (67.61%) than of female early school leavers (44.90%) were reported by teachers as not having enjoyed post-primary school ($\chi^2 = 7.57$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$).

In relation to being bullied, primary school teachers believed that 4.96% of early school leavers had been bullied in school, 70.21% had not been and they were unsure about 24.82%. This compares to post-primary school teachers' ratings, which indicated that 9.17% had been bullied, 63.33% had not, and they were unsure about 27.50%. A significantly higher percentage of early school leavers in provincial areas (15.91%) were reported by post-primary teachers as having been bullied by others, compared to 7.02% of early school leavers in urban areas and none of the early school leavers in rural areas ($\chi^2 = 12.32$; $df = 4$; $p < .05$).

Particular Problems

The teachers were also asked if the early school leavers had manifested any particular emotional, social or academic problems while attending school. The majority of early school leavers were said to have displayed a problem of some sort, by teachers in both primary and post-primary school. Primary school teachers reported that 71.11% of early school leavers had had a particular problem, while post-primary teachers rated 61.54% as having a problem.

According to the primary school teachers, 32.29% of those characterised as displaying some problems in school had family problems or their families had no

interest in the child's education (Table 4.7). Other problems that were noticed by primary teachers among future early school leavers included poor academic ability (18.75%), aggressive behaviour (13.54%), emotional problems (18.75%), lack of interest in school (10.42%), and poor attendance (9.38%).

Table 4.7. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers rated by primary school teachers as displaying particular problems.

Particular Problem	Primary	
	N	%
Family Problems / No family interest in education	31	32.29
Poor academic ability	18	18.75
Emotional Problems	18	18.75
Aggressive Behaviour	13	13.54
Poor attendance	9	9.38

According to the post-primary school teachers, 45.83% of those characterised as having a problem displayed literacy or learning difficulties. As can be seen from Table 4.8, other reported problems included aggressive or uncontrollable behaviour (30.56%), being a poor mixer, shy, or bullied (22.22%), and lack of interest in school (15.28%).

Table 4.8. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers rated by post-primary school teachers as displaying particular problems.

Particular Problem	Post-primary	
	N	%
Learning / Literacy problems	33	45.83
Aggressive / Uncontrollable Behaviour	22	30.56
Poor mixer / shy / bullied	16	22.22
No interest in school	11	15.28

Remedial / Psychological Help

Teachers were asked to indicate how many of the early school leavers received remedial or psychological help, or attended a special class while enrolled in primary and post-primary school.

Remedial Help

Primary School

Teachers indicated that 44.60% of early school leavers had received remedial help. Of those who received help, the average amount of time spent attending a remedial teacher was 3.92 years.

The vast majority (91.80%) of those who received remedial attention were assisted with English, while 29.5% received remedial assistance with Mathematics, and 4.92% received help with Irish. Three early school leavers received help in some other area, including one who was helped with all subjects, and two who received remedial help along with the rest of their class. It is likely that the latter two cases were assigned to a remedial class rather than just receiving some remedial help.

Post-Primary School

As was reported earlier, 24.41% of the early school leavers were assigned to a remedial class upon entry into second level education. A further 26.77% were subsequently assigned to a remedial class. As can be seen from Table 4.9, the total number of early school leavers placed in a remedial class at some stage during post-primary school was 51.18%.

Table 4.9. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers assigned to a remedial class in post-primary school.

Assigned to remedial class	N	%
Assigned on enrolment	31	24.41
Subsequently assigned to remedial class	34	26.77
Total	65	51.18

In addition to those initially assigned to a remedial class, 29.13% of early school leavers received some help from a remedial teacher during their time in post-primary school. Many of these were among the 26.77% subsequently assigned to a remedial class.

For those who received some assistance from a remedial teacher, the average duration of remediation was 1.68 years. Most of these early school leavers (96.8%) received remedial help with English, while 61.3% received help with Mathematics. One individual received help with History and Geography.

Comparison of Remediation in Primary and Post-Primary School

A higher percentage of early school leavers were reported by post-primary teachers than primary teachers, as having received some remedial help. In addition to the 51.18% who were assigned to a remedial class, there were the overlapping 29.13% who received some remedial help, according to post-primary teachers. It is likely that between 50-60% of the early school leavers received some remedial help during their second level education, in comparison to the 44.60% reported by primary teachers.

Those who were reported to have received help in primary school spent more time receiving this help than in post-primary school, 3.92 years versus 1.68 years. This difference is most likely related to the fact that the early school leavers did not complete their Junior Cycle education and dropped out before finishing three years at second level. Over 90% of the early school leavers who were in receipt of remediation in either primary or post-primary school were assisted with English. A higher percentage of the early school leavers were reported to have received help with Mathematics by post-primary teachers (61.3%) than by primary teachers (29.5%). Primary school teachers reported that very few (4.92%) early school leavers received remedial help with their Irish, while none received help with this subject in post-primary school.

Psychological Help / Special Class

The vast majority of the early school leavers were never referred to a psychologist while attending either primary or post-primary school. As can be seen from Table 4.10, both primary and post-primary teachers reported that over 7% of early school leavers were referred to a psychologist while in school. Only one early school leavers was reported by both primary and post-primary teachers as having been referred to a psychologist. Thus, 19 of the early school leavers were referred in either primary or post-primary school.

Table 4.10. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers who received psychological help or attended a special class, in primary and post-primary school.

Type of Help	Primary School		Post-Primary	
	N	%	N	%
Psychological Help	11	7.64	9	7.56
Special Class	16	11.19	-	-

Primary school teachers gave a reason for referral in eight of the 11 cases. Five early school leavers were referred because of a lack of academic progress (two of these also displayed anti-social behaviour). Of the remaining three, one was reported to have developmental and emotional problems, one suffered from temper tantrums and mood swings, while the third individual was reported as having a mild general learning disability.

In relation to outcome following psychological assessment, primary school teachers supplied details for 10 of the 11 referred. As a result of the referral to a psychologist, seven were placed in a special class. In one case continued remedial assistance was recommended, while for another a consistent approach to the pupil's behaviour was recommended, while assistance at home and at school was recommended for another.

Post-primary teachers offered reasons for referral for only two of the early school leavers. Both were referred as a result of anti-social behaviour, such as threatening teachers or other students. In one case the outcome of referral was that the early school leaver was referred to the school support unit, while in the case other case the teacher unsure if an assessment ever took place.

As can be seen from Table 4.10, primary school teachers reported that 11.19% of the early school leavers were assigned to a special class. At least nine of these were assigned independently of a psychological referral.

Career Guidance Classes

Post-primary school teachers were asked to report whether or not the early school leavers had attended career guidance classes during their time at the school. Only 10.38% of the early school leavers were reported as having attended such classes, while 76.42% were reported as not having done so. Teachers did not know whether 13.21% of the early school leavers had ever attended these classes.

Academic Ability

Teachers in both primary and post-primary schools were asked to rate the early school leavers' academic performance in comparison to the performance they would expect from a typical pupil of the same age. Teachers were required to rate the early school

leavers' ability on a five-point scale, from excellent to very poor, for a number of different subjects.

Primary School Subjects

The vast majority of the early school leavers were rated by teachers as performing below average (34.27%) or very poorly (34.97%) in Irish Reading compared to typical pupils of the same age (Table 4.11). Teachers rated 24.48% as of average standard in Irish Reading, while 5.59% were rated as above average, and only one early school leaver was rated as excellent in Irish Reading. In relation to Irish Writing, 35.66% were reported to have been of very poor ability, while 35.66% were rated as below average, and 25.87% of the early school leavers were rated as being at an average level. Only 2.80% of the early school leavers were rated as either above average or excellent in Irish writing.

Table 4.11. Primary school teachers' ratings of early school leavers' performance in various subjects.

Subject	Performance									
	Excellent		Above Average		Average		Below Average		Very poor	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Irish Reading	1	0.70	8	5.59	35	24.48	49	34.27	50	34.97
Irish Writing	1	0.70	3	2.10	37	25.87	51	35.66	51	35.66
English Reading	2	1.40	16	11.19	51	35.66	51	35.66	23	16.08
English Writing	2	1.39	12	8.33	53	36.81	53	36.81	24	16.67
Oral English	2	1.40	13	9.09	58	40.56	46	32.17	24	16.78
Mathematics	0	0.00	12	8.33	48	33.33	60	41.67	24	16.67
Art	5	3.47	23	15.97	84	58.33	27	18.75	5	3.47
Music	2	1.40	17	11.89	86	60.14	31	21.68	7	4.90
Sport	6	4.17	30	20.83	70	48.61	32	22.22	6	4.17

The percentage of early school leavers rated as performing well in English Reading, English Writing and Oral English was only slightly higher than that in Irish. Some 16.08% of the pupils were rated as very poor at English Reading, while 35.66% were rated as being below average. Teachers rated 35.66% as of average standard, while 12.59% were above average or excellent. Early school leavers' ratings in English Writing was similar to the ratings for English Reading. Only 9.72% of the early school leavers were rated as above average (8.33%) or excellent (1.39%) while

the remainder were rated as either average (36.81%), below average (36.81%), or very poor (16.67%). For Oral English, the teachers believed that 40.56% were rated as of average ability, while 32.17% of the pupils were below average, and 16.78% were rated as very poor. The remainder were believed to have either above average (9.09%) or excellent (1.40%) Oral English skills.

As shown in Table 4.11, none of the early school leavers were rated as of excellent ability in Mathematics, while 8.33% were rated as of above average ability, and 33.33% were rated as of average ability. Most of the early school leavers were rated as below average (41.67%) or as very poor performers (16.67%) in Mathematics.

A total of 19.44% of early school leavers were rated as either excellent or above average ability in Art. The majority (58.33%) were rated as being of average ability, while 18.75% and 3.47% were rated as below average and very poor ability, respectively (Table 4.11). For Music, 21.68% of early school leavers were believed to be of below average ability, while 4.90% were rated as very poor. Teachers rated 60.14% as of average ability, and 13.29% were rated as either excellent or above average.

In terms of sporting ability, 22.22% of early school leavers were reported as below average and a further 4.17% were rated as very poor. Teachers rated 48.61% as being of average ability compared to pupils of the same age, while 20.83% were rated as being of above average ability, and 4.17% were rated as having being of excellent sporting ability (Table 4.11).

Post-Primary School Subjects

Post-primary teachers were also asked to rate early school leavers performance on a variety of academic subjects. Results are summarised in Table 4.12.

The majority of early school leavers were rated as below average (41.03%) or very poor (27.35%) at Irish. Only 20.51% were rated as average, while 4.27% were thought to be above average and none of the early school leavers were categorised as excellent at Irish. Teachers did not know the level of performance in Irish for 5.13% of cases, while the subject was described as not applicable for 1.71%.

Table 4.12. Post-primary school teachers' ratings of early school leavers' performance in various subjects.

Subject	Performance Rating																	
	Excellent		Above Average		Average		Below Average		Very Poor		Don't Know		Not Applicable					
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%				
Irish	0	0.00	5	4.27	24	20.51	48	41.03	32	27.35	6	5.13	2	1.71				
English	1	0.84	5	4.20	44	36.97	45	37.82	21	17.65	3	2.52	0	0.00				
Mathematics	0	0.00	2	1.68	31	26.05	49	41.18	33	27.73	4	3.36	0	0.00				
Science	0	0.00	1	0.91	23	20.91	31	28.18	31	28.18	6	5.45	18	16.36				
History	0	0.00	2	1.75	29	25.44	46	40.35	24	21.05	6	5.26	7	6.14				
Geography	1	0.86	3	2.59	27	23.28	39	33.62	20	17.24	7	6.03	19	16.38				
Foreign Languages	0	0.00	1	1.02	14	14.29	6	6.12	17	17.35	4	4.08	56	57.14				
Art	2	2.00	5	5.00	29	29.00	35	35.00	5	5.00	9	9.00	15	15.00				
Business Studies	0	0.00	2	1.96	20	19.61	24	23.53	11	10.78	8	7.84	37	36.27				
Home Economics	0	0.00	3	3.19	21	22.11	16	16.84	4	4.21	7	7.37	44	46.32				
Materials Technology	1	0.96	6	5.77	19	18.27	31	29.81	7	6.73	6	5.77	34	32.69				
Metalwork	1	1.06	3	3.19	20	21.28	27	28.72	9	9.57	6	6.38	28	29.79				
Technical Graphics	0	0.00	1	1.08	14	15.05	20	21.51	4	4.30	4	4.30	50	53.76				
Physical Education	1	0.97	7	6.80	27	26.21	27	26.21	12	11.65	21	20.39	8	7.77				

Teachers rated 17.65% of early school leavers as of very poor English ability, while 37.82% were perceived to be of below average, and 36.97% of average ability. Only 5.04% were rated as either of above average or excellent ability. Teachers did not know of the English ability for 2.52% of cases.

As with Irish and English, the majority of the early school leavers were rated as either of below average (41.18%) or of very poor (27.73%) ability in Mathematics. Teachers reported that 26.05% were of average ability compared to a typical student of their age, while 1.68% were classified as above average, and none as excellent. Teachers were unable to classify 3.36% of the students as they did not know their level of performance in Mathematics (Table 4.12).

Only one of the early school leavers was rated as above average in Science, while none were categorised as excellent. Teachers reported that 20.91% as average, 28.18% as below average, and 28.18% as very poor. Teachers did not know how well 5.45% of the early school leavers performed in Science, while the subject was not applicable for the remaining 16.36%.

Only 1.75% of early school leavers were rated as above average ability in History, with none rated as excellent. One quarter (25.44%) were rated as of average ability, 40.35% were believed to be of below average ability, and 21.05% of very poor ability. For the remainder, ability was described as not known (5.26%) or not applicable (6.14%).

In relation to Geography, the percentage rated as excellent or above average was 0.86% and 2.59%, respectively. A total of 23.28% were rated as of average ability in comparison to other students of their age. One-third were categorised as below average, while 17.24% were reported to have been of very poor ability. Teachers were unable to rate 6.03% of the early school leavers, while a performance rating in Geography was not applicable in 16.38% of cases.

No early school leaver was rated as of excellent ability in Foreign Languages, while only one was rated as being of above average ability. A further 14.29% were rated as average, 6.12% were rated as below average and 17.35% as of very poor ability. Teachers were unable to rate 4.08% of the early school leavers ability, while a rating in Foreign Languages was not applicable for 57.14% of cases.

Only 2.00% of early school leavers were rated as being of excellent ability in Art and another 5.00% were rated as above average. A total of 69.00% were believed to be of either average (29.00%), below average (35.00%), or very poor (5.00%)

ability. In the case of 9.00% of early school leavers, teachers did not know how they performed at Art, while a further 15.00% fell in the not applicable category.

None of the early school leavers were believed to be of excellent ability, and only 1.96% were rated as above average ability in Business Studies. One in five (19.61%) were rated as having average ability, while another 23.53% and 10.78% were thought to be of below average or very poor ability, respectively (Table 4.12).

Teachers did not know the level of ability for 7.84% of the early school leavers, while a rating for Business Studies was not applicable for 36.27% of cases.

The majority (53.69%), of early school leavers either did not study Home Economics or their ability in the subject was not known to the teacher. Teachers rated 22.11% as of average ability in the subject, while only 3.16% were of above average ability. The remainder were accounted for in the below average (16.84%) and the very poor (4.21%) categories (Table 4.12).

Teachers reported that 5.77% of the early school leavers' ability in Materials Technology was unknown, while this subject was not applicable in 32.69% of cases. Only one of the students were believed to be of an excellent standard, while 5.77% were of above average ability. Of the remainder, 18.27% were rated as average, 29.81% as below average, and 6.73% as of very poor ability (Table 4.12).

Only 1.06% were rated as excellent and 3.19% as above average for Metalwork. Teachers rated 21.28% as of average ability, while 28.72% were rated as below average, and 9.57% were rated as very poor. The remainder were categorised as either not known (6.38%) or not applicable (29.79%).

Teachers indicated that Technical Graphics was not applicable as a subject in 53.76% of cases, while performance on the subject was not known for 4.30% of the early school leavers. The remainder were categorised as of above average (1.08%), average (15.05%), below average (21.51%), or very poor (4.30%) performance.

The final subject looked at was Physical Education. Again only one early school leaver was rated as being excellent at P.E. Another 6.80% were categorised as having been of above average ability, with 26.21% rated as having average ability, 26.21% as having below average levels of ability in P.E., and 11.65% as having very poor ability (Table 4.12). Teachers were unable to rate P.E. performance for 20.39% of cases, while it was not applicable as a subject for 7.77%.

Comparison of Ability Ratings in Primary and Post-Primary School

Primary school teachers reported that approximately 70% of the early school leavers were of below average or very poor ability in Irish Writing and Irish Reading, while 58.4% were rated as of below average or very poor ability in Mathematics. When the don't know and not applicable responses are removed from post-primary subjects, over 70% of early school leavers were rated to have been of below average or very poor ability at Irish (73.39%), Science (72.09%), and Mathematics (71.30%). Interestingly, while the percentage of early school leavers rated as of below average or very poor ability at Irish was similar at both levels of education, the performance ratings in Mathematics considerably worsened between primary and post-primary school.

The primary teachers indicated that 25.00% of the early school leavers were of above average or excellent ability at Sport, and 19.44% were categorised as such at Art. When the 'don't know' and 'not applicable' responses were removed, the post-primary subjects with the highest percentage of early school leavers achieving a rating of above average or excellent ability were Materials Technology (10.93%), Physical Education (10.81%), and Art (9.21%). Therefore, in both primary and post-primary school more early school leavers were reported to be of above average or excellent ability in Physical Education and Art than in any other subjects (apart from Materials Technology in post-primary school).

Attendance

Teachers in both primary and post-primary school were asked about the level of attendance for each year that the early school leavers attended the school. In each case the teachers were asked to indicate the number of days the pupil was absent at each grade level.

Teachers were also asked if the early school leaver or their family were ever contacted by the Gardaí or School Attendance Officer in relation to non-attendance at school, and if the parents of an early school leaver had ever been brought before court for their child's non-attendance at school.

Primary School Attendance

Many of the primary schools that were sent questionnaires were senior schools.

Therefore, attendance data were available for a smaller number of early school leavers

in junior than in senior classes. The average numbers of days absent and the standard deviation are displayed in Table 4.13.

The average number of days missed by early school leavers in Junior Infants was 32.83 days, and 25.38 days for those who repeated Junior Infants. Early school leavers were absent for an average of 23.88 days in Senior Infants. The five early school leavers who repeated Senior Infants were absent for an average of 39.20 days. In 1st class, the average number of days missed fell to 18.51, while for those who repeated this class the average number of days absent was 20. In 2nd class, there was a slight increase to an average of 22.29 days absent. Those who repeated 2nd class were absent for 16.25 days, on average.

In 3rd class, the average number of days missed was 23.22. Only six individuals repeated 3rd class and they were absent for 21.33 days on average. For 4th class, early school leavers missed 24.96 days on average, while those who repeated this class were absent for, on average, 24 days. In 5th class an average of 26.39 days missed, while those who repeated 5th class and were absent for 32 days, on average. In 6th class early school leavers averaged 34.48 days absence in the year. Only one individual repeated 6th class and she was absent for 42 days that year.

When repeated grades are excluded, it can be seen that JI and 6th class have noticeably higher absences associated with them than with other grade levels. However, when attendance is examined by location, Junior Infants has a higher level of absenteeism than any other class for provincial (31.50 days) and rural (37.27 days) early school leavers, while 6th class has the highest absenteeism for urban early school leavers (38.72 days).

During the whole of primary school, male early school leavers were absent for an average of 29.72 days and female early school leavers were absent for an average of 25.86 days. A significant difference was found between the mean number of absences among early school leavers in urban (30.23), provincial (21.93), and rural (26.34) areas ($F = 3.614$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$).

Table 4.13. Average numbers of days absent at each grade level by early school leavers in primary school.

Grade Level	N	Average number of days absent	Standard Deviation
Junior Infants	64	32.83	21.61
Repeated Junior Infants	29	25.38	15.39
Senior Infants	67	23.88	18.39
Repeated Senior Infants	5	39.20	31.79
First Class	68	18.51	14.25
Repeated First Class	2	20.00	4.24
Second Class	76	22.29	14.89
Repeated Second Class	4	16.25	7.14
Third Class	134	23.22	15.82
Repeated Third Class	6	21.33	11.08
Fourth Class	137	24.96	20.74
Repeated Fourth Class	3	24.00	13.23
Fifth Class	130	26.39	18.92
Repeated Fifth Class	5	32.00	15.73
Sixth Class	133	34.48	22.19
Repeated Sixth Class	1	42.00	-

Post-Primary School Attendance

Many of the post-primary school teachers did not supply the attendance data requested. First Year attendance information was returned for only 87 of the 130 early school leavers. Of these, the average number of days absent was 40.77 in First Year (Table 4.14). Only two of these individuals repeated First Year and they were absent for 35.50 days on average. In Second Year, information was supplied for 70 early school leavers, who were absent for an average of 53.40 days. The number of early school leavers for whom information was supplied in Third Year was even lower (n=30). These early school leavers were absent for 40.73 days on average. It is not clear how accurate some of the information on absences is, since for any of the grade levels, there may be a number of early school leavers who were enrolled for the full school year but who left during the first or second school term. Thus some early school leavers may be recorded as having been absent for a very large number of days, when in fact they

had left school. Because of this, it is difficult to draw any conclusions regarding teachers' reports of absences during post-primary school.

Table 4.14. Average numbers of days absent by early school leavers in post-primary school.

Class	N	Number of Days Absent	Standard Deviation
First Year	87	40.77	28.00
Repeated First Year	2	35.50	23.33
Second Year	70	53.40	33.50
Third Year	30	40.73	36.42

Contact by Gardaí or School Attendance Officer (SAO)

As can be seen in Table 4.15, primary and post-primary school teachers reported a similar percentage of early school leavers as having been contacted by either the Gardaí or an SAO (16.92% and 15.97%, respectively). Primary school teachers reported that the majority of early school leavers (58.46%) had had no contact with the Gardaí or SAO, while post-primary teachers reported that 59.66% had had no contact. Primary teachers did not know if 24.62% of the early school leavers had ever been contacted and post-primary teachers did not know if 24.37% had been contacted.

There were significant differences between those who were reported to have been contacted by an SAO or the Gardaí in primary school, with significantly more female (23.63%) than male (12.00%) early school leavers contacted ($\chi^2 = 6.832$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$). In terms of location, 23.68% of the urban early school leavers were contacted by the Gardaí or an SAO during primary school, compared to 11.11% of provincial early school leavers, and none in rural areas ($\chi^2 = 15.061$; $df = 4$; $p < .01$). During post-primary school, there was also a significant difference, in terms of location, between the early school leavers that were contacted, 30.95% from provincial areas, 11.76% from rural areas, and 6.67% from urban areas ($\chi^2 = 23.571$; $df = 4$; $p < 0.001$).

Primary school teachers reported that only one early school leaver's parents were brought to court for her non-attendance in school, that 83.08% had not been brought to court, and that they were unsure in 16.15% of cases (Table 4.15). Post-primary teachers reported that 5.83% of early school leavers' parents were brought before the courts, that 70.00% had not been brought to court, and that they were unsure in 24.17% of cases.

Table 4.15. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers' families contacted by SAO / Gardaí or called to court in relation to non-attendance at school.

Contact	Primary		Post-Primary	
	N	%	N	%
SAO / Gardaí	22	16.92	19	15.97
Court	1	0.77	7	5.83

Suspension

Primary teachers reported that 8.76% of the early school leavers were suspended from school at some time. Post-primary teachers were asked whether the early school leavers had ever been suspended or expelled. However, the quality of the data returned made it difficult to establish a distinction between reported suspensions and expulsions. Therefore, all data were treated as referring to suspensions alone. This may have led to a small number of expulsions not being reported. However, the omission is likely to be small, as teachers' reports indicated that none of the early school leavers left school as a result of expulsion. Post-primary teachers reported that 49.59% were suspended or expelled.

Six (50.00%) of those suspended in primary school had engaged in aggressive or bullying behaviour while the other 50.00% had been disruptive, either in the class or in the school in general. According to the post-primary teachers, 68.33% of the suspended students had been suspended for disruptive behaviour, while 21.67% had been suspended for aggressive behaviour or threatening a fellow student. Other reasons for suspension from post-primary school included verbal or physical abuse toward teachers or students (18.33%) and breaking school rules, for example mitching, (21.67%).

There were significant differences between the early school leavers that were suspended from post-primary school. A total of 63.9% male early school leavers were suspended from post-primary school compared to 29.4% females ($\chi^2 = 14.195$; $df = 1$; $p < 0.001$). When the data is analysed by location, 61.9% of the provincial early school leavers had been suspended from post-primary school, compared to 53.2% of urban and 10.5% of rural early school leavers ($\chi^2 = 14.474$; $df = 2$; $p < 0.001$).

Parental Interest

Primary and post-primary teachers were asked to rate maternal¹ and paternal of interest levels in the early school leavers' education.

Maternal Interest

Primary school teachers thought that 11.19% of early school leavers' mothers were very interested in their child's education, with 59.44% rated as somewhat interested and 25.17% as not interested. They reported that they did not know how interested 2.10% of the mothers were and that maternal interest levels were not applicable in 2.10% of cases (Table 4.16).

Post-primary teachers rated 8.06% of mothers as very interested in their child's education, 46.77% somewhat interested and 27.42% as not interested. They did not know how interested 12.90% of mothers were in their child's schooling and maternal interest levels were described as not applicable in 4.84% of cases.

Table 4.16. Numbers and percentages of mothers rated by primary and post-primary teachers as expressing various interest levels in their child's education.

Interest Level	Primary School		Post-primary School	
	N	%	N	%
Very interested	16	11.19	10	8.06
Somewhat interested	85	59.44	58	46.77
Not interested	36	25.17	34	27.42
Don't know	3	2.10	16	12.90
Not applicable	3	2.10	6	4.84

Paternal Interest

Primary school teachers rated only 5.63% of fathers as being very interested in their child's education, with 25.35% reported as being somewhat interested, and 34.51% as not interested (Table 4.17). They did not know how interested 23.94% of the fathers were in their child's education and paternal interest was described as not applicable for 10.56% of cases.

¹ Teachers were asked to rate the father's / male guardian's and the mother's / female guardian's level of interest in their child's education. In reporting the results, the term paternal will be used to refer to father / male guardian and the phrase maternal will be used to refer to mother / female guardian.

Post-primary school teachers rated only 2.44% of fathers as being very interested in their child's schooling, while 25.20% were rated as somewhat interested, and 26.83% as not being interested. Post-primary teachers did not know how interested 31.71% of fathers were and paternal interest was described as not applicable for 13.82% of cases. There was a significant difference between paternal interest when analysed by location ($\chi^2 = 29.84$; $df = 8$; $p < 0.001$), with 44.19% of fathers in provincial areas reported to be very or somewhat interested in their child's education during primary school, compared to 16.13% in urban areas, and 27.78% in rural areas.

Table 4.17. Numbers and percentages of fathers rated by primary and post-primary teachers as expressing various interest levels in their child's education.

Interest Level	Primary		Post-primary	
	N	%	N	%
Very interested	8	5.63	3	2.44
Somewhat interested	36	25.35	31	25.20
Not interested	49	34.51	33	26.83
Don't know	34	23.94	39	31.71
Not applicable	15	10.56	17	13.82

Comparison of Maternal and Paternal Interest

Overall, a higher percentage of mothers than fathers were regarded by teachers as being very interested in their child's schooling at both levels of education. Primary school teachers rated only 5.63% of fathers as very interested in their child's schooling compared to 11.19% of mothers, while post-primary teachers rated 2.44% of fathers and 8.06% of mothers as very interested.

Primary school teachers rated a higher percentage of fathers (34.51%) than mothers (25.17%) as not being interested in their child's education. However post-primary teachers rated similar percentages of mothers and fathers as not being interested in their child's schooling (27.42% and 26.83%, respectively).

In addition, the level of don't know responses from teachers was higher for fathers than for mothers at both levels, 23.94% versus 2.10% in primary school and 31.71% versus 12.90% in post-primary school. This could be taken as an indication that there was less interaction between the schools and early school leavers' fathers.

Parent-School Interaction

Teachers were asked to describe the level of parental attendance at parent-teacher meetings. They were also asked if, apart from parent-teacher meetings, the parents had ever approached the school to discuss their child's welfare.

As can be seen from Table 4.18, teachers reported that 60.14% of parents of identified early school leavers attended parent-teacher meetings whenever they were held in primary school, while only 23.48% of parents were reported as doing so in post-primary school. Primary school teachers reported that 34.97% of parents only occasionally attended these meetings, while post-primary teachers reported that 41.74% occasionally attended. Primary teachers indicated that 4.90% of parents never attended a parent-teacher meeting, while post-primary teachers indicated that 33.04% never attended these meetings.

A significant difference was present when parental attendance at these meetings during primary school was analysed by location ($\chi^2 = 18.712$; $df = 4$; $p < 0.001$), with 22.22% of rural parents never attending the meetings compared to 5.13% in provincial areas, and 1.16% in urban areas. No significant differences was found in parental attendance at parent-teacher meetings in post-primary school. It may be possible that the difference reported by primary school teachers was due to small rural schools not having parent-teacher meetings as regularly as larger schools in provincial or urban areas.

Table 4.18. Numbers and percentages of parents who attended parent-teacher meetings with various degrees of frequency or approached teachers outside of parent-teacher meetings.

Parent - School Interaction	Primary		Post-primary	
	N	%	N	%
Attendance at Parent-Teacher Meetings				
Whenever they were held	86	60.14	27	23.48
Occasionally	50	34.97	48	41.74
Never	7	4.90	38	33.04
Not applicable	0	0.00	2	1.74
Outside Parent-Teacher Meetings				
Parents who approached the school	68	51.52	50	45.45

As can be seen in Table 4.18, primary school teachers reported that, outside of parent-teacher meetings, 51.52% of parents of early school leavers had approached the primary school to discuss their child's welfare. A similar percentage (45.45%) of

parents were reported by post-primary teachers as having visited the school, outside of parent-teacher meetings, to discuss their child's welfare.

When approaches made by parents to the post-primary school were analysed by location, significant differences were found ($\chi^2 = 12.872$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$), with 55.26% of parents in provincial areas approaching the school, 50.91% doing so in urban areas, and only 5.88% in rural areas. A significant gender difference was also present ($\chi^2 = 8.125$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$), with 57.14% of the parents of male early school leavers approaching post-primary school compared to 29.79% of parents of female early school leavers.

Reasons for Early School Leaving

Post-primary school teachers were asked why, in their opinion, the early school leavers had dropped out of school. Possible reasons were offered for 126 of 129 early school leavers. In many cases multiple reasons for leaving were offered. Therefore, the reported percentages sum to more than 100%.

As can be seen from Table 4.19, the most common reason offered (for 39.68% of the early school leavers) was that they had dropped out of school because they had no interest or were bored in school. A further 19.05% were thought to have left because they had been suspended so often or missed so many days, while 17.46% were thought to have left because they had gotten or wanted to get a job. Lack of family interest in education was given as a reason in 15.87% of cases, and 11.11% of early school leavers were believed to have left because they could not handle the discipline.

Teachers believed that low self-esteem, emotional problems, or having been bullied accounted for 7.94% dropping out, while Youthreach accounted for 7.14%. Three individuals were thought to have left to take care of their siblings, two became single parents, two had health problems that resulted in them leaving, while another two were on remand when they left school and were subsequently given a prison sentence. Teachers did not know why 7.94% of early school leavers left school, while other reasons were cited for 6.35%. These reasons included peer pressure, not attending a local school, fear of not doing well, being academically weak, frustration resulting from being dyslexic, and reacting badly to a teacher's comment.

Table 4.19. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers believed by post-primary teachers to have left school for various reasons.

Reason for leaving school	N	%
No interest / bored with school	50	39.68
Suspended / missed so many days	24	19.05
Got / wanted a job	22	17.46
No family value on education	20	15.87
Could not handle discipline	14	11.11
Low self-esteem / emotional problems / bullied	10	7.94
Youthreach	9	7.14
Take care of children	3	2.38
Became single parent	2	1.59
Health problems	2	1.59
Awaiting trial	2	1.59
Don't know	10	7.94
Other	8	6.35

Possible Preventative Measures

Post-primary teachers were asked what could have been done to prevent the individual early school leavers from dropping out of school. Possible preventions were suggested for 98 of the 129 early school leavers, with some teachers offering multiple suggestions.

The most common suggestion offered (for 28.57% of the early school leavers) was that smaller classes, one-to-one attention, or some career guidance might have prevented them from dropping out of school (Table 4.20). Teachers believed that extra family support or the employment of an HSCL or Resource teacher would have been beneficial in 25.51% of cases and it was suggested that a counsellor, psychologist, or social worker may have helped in 21.43% of cases. For a further 23.47% the teachers did not know what could have been done or believed there was nothing that could have prevented the students from leaving school.

Access to sheltered workshops were cited for 9.18% of cases, while teachers thought that access to homework or learning support might have prevented 8.16% from leaving school. The availability of a SAO was mentioned for 8.16% of cases, while a broader curriculum was reported as something that may have prevented early

school leaving in 5.10% of cases. A shorter school day was also suggested in 5.10% of cases.

The teachers offered other suggestions that might have prevented early school leaving in 7.14% of cases. These other suggestions included offering an interagency approach for two individuals, enrolment in Youthreach for another two, repeating a year, enrolment in a school closer to the individual's home, and prevention of bullying.

Table 4.20. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers who may have benefited from various extra supports while attending post-primary school.

Suggestions to prevent early school leaving	N	%
Smaller classes / one-to-one attention / career guidance	28	28.57
Family support / HSCL officer / Resource teacher	25	25.51
Don't know / Nothing	23	23.47
Counselling / psychologist / social worker	21	21.43
Sheltered workshop	9	9.18
SAO	8	8.16
Homework / learning support	8	8.16
Broader curriculum	5	5.10
Shorter school days	5	5.10
Other	7	7.14

Summary

Over 90% of the early school leavers completed an entrance exam before enrolling in post-primary school, and three-quarters of these were reported to have performed below average. One quarter were reported to have been assigned to a remedial class upon enrolment, while 58% were assigned to a streamed class.

The majority of the early school leavers were described by primary teachers as having got on well with their classmates and as well behaved at break time, while 20% were described as engaging in bullying behaviour. Seventy percent of the early leavers had a particular problem while at primary school (such as family or emotional problems), and 40% had received remedial assistance.

Post-primary teachers described nearly half of the early school leavers as having got on well with their classmates and as well behaved at break time, while 25%

were described as engaging in bullying behaviour. Twenty percent had threatened a member of the school staff. Post-primary teachers also reported that over 60% of early leavers had a particular problem while at school, including learning or literacy problems and aggressive or uncontrollable behaviour. At least 50% had received remedial help in post-primary school.

In relation to academic ability in primary school, the majority of early school leavers were rated as below average or very poor in Irish Reading, Irish Writing and Mathematics. In post-primary school, the majority were rated as below average or very poor in Irish, English, Mathematics, Science, History, and Geography.

Average number of days absent in primary school was highest in Junior Infants (32.83) and sixth class (34.48). While in post-primary school, the average number of days absent was 40.77 in first year, 53.40 in second year, and 40.73 in third year. Nearly 50% of the early leavers had been suspended from post-primary school.

Post-primary teachers believed the main reasons for dropping out were lack of interest in school, suspension or missing so many days, wanting a job, and lack of family valuing of education. The most commonly suggested preventative measures included smaller classes/one-to-one attention, family support, and counselling.

5. Comparison of Data Collected from Early School Leavers and Teachers

As reported in the previous chapter, questionnaires were sent to the primary and post-primary schools attended by the identified early school leavers. Of the 144 questionnaires returned from primary schools, 48 related to early school leavers who had been interviewed. Of the 129 questionnaires returned from post-primary schools, 36 related to early school leavers who had been interviewed. Full data (i.e., interview, primary and post-primary questionnaires) were available for 30 early school leavers.

Some of the topics addressed in the teachers' questionnaires were also addressed in the early school leavers interview. This chapter compares the responses of teachers and early school leavers on a number of topics, including: academic ability, remedial assistance, behaviour, enjoyment of school, suspensions, attendance, reasons for leaving school and possible preventative measures. All numbers and percentages refer to the group of early school leavers who were interviewed, and not to the total sample of early school leavers.

Scholastic Ability

In post-primary schools that had an entrance exam, teachers were asked how the early school leavers had performed. Reported performances were grouped as below average, average, or above average accordingly. Of the 32 who had taken an entrance exam, the vast majority (78.1%) scored below average, while six scored as average and one scored as above average (Table 5.1). Of those who scored below average, the majority (60.00%) perceived their own ability during primary school as about middle of the class, while three rated themselves as better than most, six rated themselves as not as good as most, and one was unsure. Two thirds (66.67%) rated themselves as middle of the class in post-primary school, while six rated themselves as not as good as most and one was unsure.

All of the six whose performance was rated as average on the entrance exam rated their own ability in primary school as middle of the class, while half rated themselves as middle of the class in post-primary with the other half saying they were not as good as most or did not know. The one early school leaver who was rated as

above average on the entrance exam rated herself as about the middle of the class in both primary and post-primary school.

Table 5.1. Comparison of teachers' ratings of early school leavers performance on school entrance exams, and early school leavers self-rating of ability compared to other pupils and students.

Self rating of performance compared to other pupils/students in the class		Performance on entrance exam					
		Below average		Average		Above Average	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary	Better than most	3	12.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
	Middle of the class	15	60.00	6	100.00	1	100.00
	Worse than most	6	24.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
	Don't know	1	4.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Post-primary ¹	Better than most	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
	Middle of the class	16	66.67	3	50.00	1	100.00
	Worse than most	6	25.00	2	33.33	0	0.00
	Don't know	2	8.33	1	16.67	0	0.00

Teachers were asked to rate the early school leaver's performance on a range of subjects in primary and post-primary school. The ratings on all subjects in primary school were averaged, giving an overall primary school score ranging from 1 (excellent) to 5 (very poor). The same was done with all post-primary subjects for which a rating was given.

Primary school teachers rated half of the early school leavers as below average overall and 41.67% as average. Three (6.25%) were rated as above average, one as very poor, and none as excellent. Of those with an overall rating of below average, the majority (66.67%) rated themselves as middle of the class in primary school, while 25% rated themselves as not as good as most, one rated herself as better than most and one was not sure. Of those with an overall rating of average, 60% rated themselves as middle of the class, 15% rated themselves as better than most, 20% rated themselves as not as good as most, and one said that he was unsure. Two of the three rated as above average rated themselves as better than most pupils in their class, while the other rated herself as about middle of the class. The early school leaver rated as very poor overall also rated himself as not as good as most of the pupils in his class.

¹ One early school leaver did not attend post-primary school, and did not therefore offer a rating.

Post-primary teachers rated 51.52% of the early school leavers as below average. Another 36.36% were rated as average, 12.12% as very poor, and none as being excellent or above average at a range of subjects in post primary school. Of those rated by teachers as average, 58.33% had rated themselves as about middle, 33.33% rated themselves as not as good as most pupils in their class, and one was unsure. Of those rated as below average, 64.71% rated themselves as about the middle, 23.53% rated themselves as not as good as most and two were unsure. The three who were rated by teachers as very poor rated themselves as about the middle of the class in post-primary school.

Teachers were asked if the early school leavers had manifested any particular problems while at school. Primary school teachers reported that eight of the interviewed early school leavers had a particular problem with academic ability. Of these, five rated their own ability in primary school as average, while only one perceived his own ability as below average. Five of those interviewed were rated by post-primary teachers as having a particular problem with learning or literacy. Of these, three had rated themselves as about the middle of the class while in post-primary school, while two had rated themselves as not as good as most.

Overall, two tendencies were evident in self-ratings. Firstly, early school leavers were inclined to rate their own ability more positively than the teachers did, and secondly, they were inclined to rate themselves as of average ability.

Remedial Assistance

Primary school teachers reported that 21 of the early school leavers interviewed had received remediation, although only 16 of these reported that they had attended a remedial teacher in primary school. A further six early school leavers reported that they had received remediation, but were not reported by teachers as having done so.

Teachers reported that three of the early school leavers interviewed had been assigned to a special class while in primary school. Again there was some discrepancy between teachers' reports and the self-reports. Only one of those reported by teachers as being in a special class said himself that he had been so, while a further three reported having been in a special class, but were not reported by teachers as having been.

Behaviour

Both primary and post-primary school teachers were asked if the early school leavers had been well behaved and if they had paid attention in class. The responses were compared to the early school leavers own reports of how frequently they had acted up in class and how frequently they had got in trouble with teachers. While these questions are not directly comparable, some agreement should be expected. For example, an interviewee who reported messing in class on a daily basis could be expected to be reported by teachers as not well behaved.

Primary teachers reported that 19 (41.30%) of the interviewed early school leavers had not paid attention in class. Of these, 52.63% said they had acted up either daily or weekly, while the same percentage said they got into trouble with teachers either weekly or daily. However, 31.58% said that they rarely or never acted up in class, and 42.11% said that they rarely got into trouble.

Most (70.83%) of the interviewed early school leavers were reported by primary teachers as having been well behaved in class. The majority of these agreed that they had rarely or never acted up in class (61.76%), or gotten into trouble (70.58%). However, 26.47% said they had gotten in trouble and acted up in class on a weekly or daily basis.

Twelve (25%) were reported by teachers as not having been well behaved in primary school and, of those, 66.66% said that they had acted up in class and got in trouble on a weekly or daily basis. Only one of the early school leavers reported by teachers as not well behaved reported acting up in class on a monthly basis, while three reported acting up either rarely or never, and three said that they had rarely got in trouble.

Post-primary teachers were also asked if the early school leavers had paid attention or were well behaved in class. Teachers reported that only ten (28.57%) of the early school leavers had paid attention in class. Of these, four said they had rarely got in trouble, two said they had done so on a monthly basis and four said they had done so on a weekly or daily basis. Eight of the ten early school leavers reported by teachers as having paid attention said they had acted up on a weekly or daily basis, while one said they had done so on a monthly basis and only one said they had rarely done so. Over half (57.14%) of the early school leavers were reported by teachers as not having paid attention in class. Of these, 75% had reported getting in trouble with teachers on a weekly or daily basis, while 25% said they had only rarely or never done

so. Sixty-five percent of the early school leavers who were reported by teachers as not having paid attention in class, reported having acted up in class on a weekly or daily basis, while six reported having done so rarely or never and one reported having done so on a monthly basis.

Post-primary teachers reported that 13 (37.14%) of the interviewed early school leavers had been well behaved in class during post-primary school. Of these, five said they had got in trouble on a weekly or daily basis, and eight said they had acted up on a weekly or daily basis. Seven said they had got in trouble rarely or never, while four said they had acted up with the same frequency. Teachers reported that 51.43% of the early school leavers had not been well behaved in class. The vast majority (72.22%) of these had reported getting into trouble on a weekly or daily basis, while 65% reported acting up or messing in class on a weekly or daily basis. Five of those described by teachers as not well behaved reported that they had rarely or never got into trouble, while six reported that they had rarely or never acted up and one said he had acted up on a monthly basis.

Overall, in the majority of cases, teachers' reports of whether early school leavers paid attention or were well behaved in class were in agreement with the early school leavers' own reports of how frequently they got into trouble and acted up in class. However, in the case of a reasonable proportion of early school leavers there was a discrepancy between the teacher's and the early school leaver's report. There was a higher level of discrepancy between teachers' reports and early school leavers' reports in post-primary school, with early school leavers more likely to say that they had misbehaved, when teachers reported they had behaved well.

Bullying

Only one interviewed early school leaver was reported by primary teachers as being bullied, while teachers said they were unsure in relation to a further 12. The early school leaver who was reported by teachers as being bullied did not himself report having been bullied. Of the six early school leavers who reported that they were bullied in primary school, teachers reported that four had not been, while they were unsure in relation to two.

Post-primary school teachers reported that four of the interviewed early school leavers had been bullied, while they were unsure whether a further eight had been. Of the four who were reported by teachers as being bullied, only one said in the interview that he had been bullied. A further two reported in the interview that they had been

bullied in post-primary school (but were reported by teachers as not having been bullied).

Enjoyment of School

Primary school teachers indicated that 23.91% of early school leavers who had been interviewed had enjoyed school. All but one of these said that they had enjoyed primary school very much or somewhat, with only one early school leaver saying that he did not enjoy it at all. Fifteen (32.61%) were reported by teachers as not having enjoyed primary school. However, self-reports indicated that two-thirds of these had enjoyed primary school very much or somewhat, and only one third did not enjoy it. In the case of 20 of the interviewed early school leavers (43.48%) teachers were unsure if they had enjoyed primary school or not. Of these, the vast majority (90%) said that they had enjoyed primary school very much or somewhat, with only two saying that they had not enjoyed primary school at all.

Data from both post-primary teachers and early school leavers on enjoyment of post-primary school were available for 35 interviewees. The majority (62.86%) of these were perceived by teachers as not having enjoyed post-primary school. However, self-reports indicated that 63.63% had either enjoyed post-primary school very much or somewhat, while 27.28% said that they had not enjoyed it, and two were unsure how they felt. Only four early school leavers were reported by post-primary teachers as having enjoyed school. Two of these said that they had either enjoyed post-primary school somewhat or very much, while two said that they had not enjoyed it at all. Teachers reported that they were unsure whether nine (25.71%) of the early school leavers had enjoyed post-primary school. Of these, three said they had either enjoyed post-primary school somewhat or very much, while four said that they had not enjoyed it at all and two were unsure. Overall, both primary and post-primary school teachers were more likely than early school leavers to rate the early school leavers as not having enjoyed school.

Contact with the School Attendance Office or Juvenile Liaison Officer

Eight early school leavers were reported by primary school teachers as having been contacted by the School Attendance Officer or Gardaí for poor attendance. Of these, five reported such contact themselves during the interview. Three other early school leavers reported having been contacted by the SAO or Gardaí while in primary school

and, of these, one was reported by teachers as not having had such contact, while teachers were unsure in the case of the other two.

Suspensions and Expulsions

Eight early school leavers reported that they had been suspended during primary school. Only four of these were reported by teachers as having been suspended. In addition, two early school leavers who were reported by teachers as having been suspended, did not themselves report having been suspended. The reasons given by early school leavers and teachers for suspensions were compared. Disruptive behaviour or messing was mentioned by five early school leavers and three teachers. Three teachers and two early school leavers mentioned aggressive or antisocial behaviour, while two early school leavers mentioned smoking.

Post-primary teachers reported that 20 early school leavers had been suspended while in school. Of these, 16 (80%) said that they themselves had been suspended. Only one early school leaver who had reported being suspended was not reported by teachers as having been so. The most common reason for suspension, given in 55.00% of cases by teachers and 44.44% of cases by early school leavers was disruptive behaviour or messing. Aggressive behaviour or fighting was also reported by a similar percentage of both teachers and early school leavers (15% and 11.11%, respectively). A higher percentage of early school leavers (29.63%) than teachers (10.00%) gave verbal or physical abuse as a reason for suspension, and a higher percentage of teachers (35.00%) than of early school leavers (11.11%) cited breaking school rules. Finally, 22.22% of the early school leavers said they had been suspended for mitching, while 8.33% of the teachers gave this as a reason.

Last Year of School

Although post-primary teachers were asked for information about individual early school leaver's attendance at each grade level, many did not supply the information. Therefore, teachers' and early school leavers' reports could only be compared for 28 cases. In four of these, there were discrepancies between the reports as to when the early school leaver had left school. For example, one early school leaver said that first year was the last year of school he had completed, while his teacher reported that he had been in school until third year.

Reasons for Leaving School

When asked about causes for dropout, a lack or loss of interest in school was the most frequent response given by both teachers and early school leavers (40.00% and 48.57%, respectively) (Table 5.2). Wanting money or a job was the given as a reason by 31.43% of early school leavers, but only 8.57% of the teachers. Teachers thought that a lack of family value on education was responsible for dropout in 22.86% of cases, although none of the early school leavers mentioned family as a reason for leaving school. School factors were cited by 20% of early school leavers but by none of the teachers.

Table 5.2. Numbers and percentages of early school leavers and teachers giving various reasons for leaving school.

Reasons for leaving school	Early School Leavers		Teachers	
	N	%	N	%
Lost interest in school	17	48.57	14	40.00
Wanted money or a job	11	31.43	3	8.57
School related problem ²	7	20.00	0	0.00
Expelled	7	20.00	0	0.00
Family background	0	0.00	8	22.86
Personal characteristics ³	0	0.00	4	11.43

The discrepancy between early school leavers’ and teachers’ responses is further illustrated by examining some differences between individual responses. For example, of the three early school leavers whom teachers believed to have left because they got or wanted a job, none gave a job as their reason for leaving; all three said that they left because they had lost interest in school or in study. Of the fourteen reported by teachers as leaving school because they had no interest or were bored, only five gave this as their reason for leaving. Indeed, three said it was because they were expelled. Teachers believed that eight had left school because they came from a family background that did not value education. Of the eight, only one gave a reason related to family (her mother wanted her at home to mind her siblings), while two

² Those giving school related reasons included early school leavers who said that they left because they did not like teachers, did not like school, had a problem with a teacher, or there were not enough practical subjects.

³ Personal reasons included low self esteem, not being able to handle discipline, and emotional problems.

mentioned school factors (not being able to keep up with studies and not enough practical subjects).

Of the three believed by teachers to have left school because they had been suspended so often or had missed so many days, one said that she had left because she lost interest in school, one because her friends were leaving, and one because she wanted a job. Teachers reported that two early school leavers left because they could not handle the discipline. Both of these reported losing interest in school as their reason for leaving. One also said he left because he did not like the teachers, and the other mentioned that she wanted a job. One early school leaver was believed to have left because of low self-esteem, but in fact said that he had been expelled.

Looking at the overall sample it would appear as if teachers and early school leavers give similar reasons for leaving school. However, a more in-depth examination reveals that, while teachers correctly identify some of the main reasons for dropping out, in many cases they did not correctly associate the reasons with the students.

Parental Support

Teachers reported that in eight cases, the early school leaver had left school because he or she came from a family background that did not value education. The responses of these early school leavers on items relating to family support were examined. Five of the eight said that one or both parents had encouraged them to go to post-primary school, while two said they had been encouraged to go but did not specify by whom, and one had not been encouraged. Three early school leavers said that their main reason for missing school in primary and post-primary was that they did not want to go, which suggests that their parents allowed them to stay at home when they wanted, while one said he had missed school because his parents needed help on the farm. One said that she had left school because her mother had got a job and needed her at home to look after her siblings. When asked to describe their parents' reaction to them leaving school, two early school leavers said that their parents had been disappointed, three said that they had been initially disappointed but were okay now, one said that they were okay about it, one said she did not know and one said his parents agreed that it was necessary for him to leave because of his medical condition. Only three of the early school leavers said that their parents had tried to stop them from leaving school.

Preventative Measures

Teachers were asked to specify what action could have been taken to stop the student leaving school. These responses are compared to the responses of early school leavers when asked what could have been done to stop them leaving school. Teachers reported that nothing could have been done or they did not know what could have been done in relation to only four (14.29%) of the early school leavers. In contrast, 20 (71.43%) of the early school leavers said that nothing could have been done to make them stay in school.

The most common responses among teachers were that smaller classes, one-to-one attention, career guidance, family support or the services of a counsellor, psychologist or social worker might have prevented the student dropping out. Of the early school leavers who said that something could have been done, four said that they would have stayed if someone had shown an interest in them or explained why they should stay. This would seem to be in line with what teachers said about one-to-one attention, career guidance, and the involvement of support services. However, none of the teachers suggested these in relation to the early school leavers who mentioned interest as a possible preventive measure. Instead, teachers suggested family support in the case of one early school leaver, a broader curriculum in the case of another, and homework support in the case of another. The involvement of Gardai was mentioned by two of the early school leavers and in one case the teacher had also mentioned SAO involvement as a possible preventive measure.

Summary

Early school leavers rated their scholastic ability more positively than teachers did. Discrepancies were found in reports of remedial assistance and special class assignment. Primary school teachers reported a larger number of early school leavers receiving remedial assistance and being assigned to a special class than the early school leavers themselves reported.

In the majority of cases, teachers' reports of whether early school leavers had paid attention or were well behaved in class were in agreement with the early school leavers' own reports. However, in the case of a reasonable proportion, there was a higher level of discrepancy in post-primary school, with early school leavers more likely to say that they had misbehaved, when teachers reported they had behaved well.

There was also some discrepancy between the teachers' and early school leavers' reports of bullying at both primary and post-primary level. More early leavers reported being bullied than teachers reported, and most of those reported by teachers as having been bullied reported that they had not been bullied. Both primary and post-primary teachers rated the majority of early school leavers as not having enjoyed school, whereas a large majority of early school leavers indicated that they had enjoyed primary school and half stated that they enjoyed post-primary school.

In primary school, there was some discrepancy between teachers' and early school leavers' responses, with only half of the early school leavers reported to have been suspended reporting the same. In post-primary school, the majority of early school leavers reported by teachers to have been suspended agreed.

The majority of teachers and early leavers concurred that the main reason for leaving school was loss of interest. However, while teachers identified the main reasons for dropping out, they did not always correctly associate the reasons with students.

6. Characteristics of Primary and Post-Primary Schools

Principals in primary and post-primary schools attended by identified early school leavers were sent questionnaires about the characteristics of the school, including: absenteeism; attendance and dropout rates; general pupil characteristics; and characteristics of the community in which the school was located.

Thirty-five primary principals and 39 post-primary principals were sent questionnaires. Of these, 28 primary and 27 post-primary principals returned completed questionnaires. Of the primary school questionnaires returned, eight were from urban schools, 13 from rural and seven from provincial schools. Of the post-primary questionnaires returned, 12 were from urban schools, 10 from rural and five were from provincial schools.

This chapter summarises the responses and where possible the responses of primary and post-primary principals will be summarised together. Where noteworthy differences by location (rural, urban or provincial) arise they will also be reported.

The percentages and sample sizes (n) reported in the results represent the valid cases for each question, rather than the total number of respondents¹. Results will be grouped under three headings:

- school characteristics;
- pupil and family characteristics;
- local community characteristics.

General School Characteristics

The questionnaire for both primary and post-primary principals included items on a number of school characteristics: gender composition, enrolment, attendance and dropout rates, suspensions and expulsions, and absenteeism. Primary school principals were also asked about the frequency of report cards and parent-teacher meetings, while post-primary principals were asked about the Junior and Senior Cycle Programmes offered and the availability of a career guidance service.

¹ In some cases, items were not applicable to schools, while in others, principals simply did not answer particular items.

General School Characteristics - Primary

The majority (64.29%) of primary schools, including all of the rural schools, had a mixed sex enrolment. Of the remaining schools, half were single sex boys schools and half were single sex girls schools. The average total enrolment at the start of the 1999/2000 school year was 177.40 pupils, ranging from 30 pupils in the smallest school to 471 pupils in the largest school. Unsurprisingly, rural schools had the smallest average enrolment (72 pupils) while urban and provincial schools had similar size enrolments (285.29 and 235.14, respectively).

The majority (67.86%) of principals said that report cards were sent to parents on a yearly basis, while 10.71% said they were sent once per term. Just over one fifth (20.43%) of principals said that report cards were never sent to parents. Over one third (38.46%) of rural principals indicated that they never sent report cards, compared to only one urban principal and none of the provincial principals.

The majority (67.86%) of principals said that parent-teacher meetings took place once a year, while 32.14% said they took place once a term. Principals reported that an average of 85.70% of parents attended parent-teacher meetings, with the percentage attending ranging between schools from 50% to 100%. The percentage attendance rate for schools with yearly parent-teacher meetings was 87.17%, and 82.78% for those with parent-teacher meetings once a term.

General School Characteristics - Post-Primary

The majority (81.48%) of post-primary schools were mixed sex, while 11.11% were single sex boys schools and 7.41% were single sex girls schools. The average total enrolment at the start of the 1999/2000 school year was 621.69 students, ranging from 151 students in the smallest school to 1,641 students in the largest school.

Principals were asked which of a number of Junior and Senior Cycle programmes were offered by their school and which of these programmes included a student work placement component. All of the post-primary schools offered the Junior Certificate, while 18.52% offered the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (Table 6.1). None of the schools offered work placements as part of the Junior Cycle programmes.

Two-thirds of schools offered Transition Year and, of these, 88.89% offered a work placement as part of the year. All of the schools offered the Leaving Certificate Programme, of which only 4.17% offered a work placement. Just over one half

(51.85%) of schools offered the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme and a work placement was offered as part of the programme in the vast majority (92.86%) of these schools. Just under two-thirds of schools offered the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and 64.71% of these offered a work placement as part of the programme.

Table 6.1. Numbers and percentages of principals reporting that specific Junior and Senior Cycle programmes were available in their school, and which of the programmes included a work placement for students.

Programme	Programme Offered		Work Placement Included	
	N	%	N	%
Junior Certificate	27	100.00	0	0.00
Junior Certificate Schools	5	18.52	0	0.00
Transition Year	18	66.67	16	88.89
Leaving Certificate	27	100.00	1	4.17
Leaving Certificate Applied	14	51.85	13	92.86
Leaving Certificate Vocational	17	62.96	11	64.71

Career Guidance in Post-Primary School

All of the post-primary schools offered a career guidance service. Principals were asked for which grade levels career guidance was compulsory. Less than a quarter (22.22%) of principals said that it was compulsory in first year, while 18.52% said that it was compulsory in second year and 44.44% said it was compulsory in third year (Table 6.2). Over half (56.52%) of principals of schools that offered the Transition Year Programme said that career guidance was compulsory during that year. The majority of principals (74.07%) said that it was compulsory during the Senior Cycle.

Table 6.2. Numbers and percentages of principals stating grade levels at which career guidance was compulsory.

Years in which career guidance is compulsory	N	%
First year	6	22.22
Second year	5	18.52
Third year	12	44.44
Transition year	13	56.52
Fifth year	20	74.07
Sixth year	20	74.07

Attendance and Dropout Rates

The average attendance rate among primary schools who returned questionnaires was 88.56%, with rates for individual schools ranging from 75% to 95%. Primary school principals were asked if any pupils in 5th class or 6th class had dropped out during the 1998/99 school year. None of the schools reported pupils dropping out of school in 5th class. One principal reported one pupil dropping out in 6th class, while another reported two pupils dropping out in 6th class.

The average attendance rate among post-primary schools was 84.86%, with rates for individual schools ranging from 63% to 96%. Principals were asked to indicate the number of students who dropped out during the 1998/99 school year. Average dropout in first year was 0.65 students per school, with 39.13% of school having at least one first year dropout. Among schools with first year dropouts, the average number of dropouts was 1.32. Average dropout in second year was considerably higher at 2.61 students per school, with 65.22% of principals reporting that at least one student had dropped out during second year. Among these schools, an average of 5.46 students dropped out during second year. Average dropout in third year was higher again at 4.61, and 73.91% of principals reported that at least one student had dropped out during third year. Among schools with third year dropouts, the average number of was 6.24.

Data on dropout for first, second and third year were summed to produce an overall dropout rate for Junior Cycle during 1998/99. In total, 2.36% of the Junior Cycle enrolment dropped out during the 1998/99 school year. There was no significant difference in dropout rate by school type. Also, while larger schools had greater *numbers* of dropouts, the *percentage* of Junior Cycle dropouts was not significantly correlated with school size ($r=.038$, $p=.86$; *ns*).

Absenteeism

Principals in primary and post-primary school were asked a number of questions relating to absenteeism: if their school had any specific measures in place to deal with absenteeism, if their school had been successful in dealing with absenteeism, if they had sufficient resources to deal with the problem and what, if any, extra resources would help their school to reduce the level of absenteeism. The majority (71.43%) of primary principals reported that their school had specific measures in place to deal with occasional or persistent absenteeism. However, while all urban and six of the

seven provincial principals reported that such measures were in place, only six of the 13 rural principals indicated that they had such measures.

Of those with measures in place, 52.38% used the services of a School Attendance Officer, while 47.62% said that they contacted parents (Table 6.3). One third said that a note or signature from a parent was required if a pupils was absent, while 28.57% had a HSCL co-ordinator who dealt with absenteeism. One fifth (19.05%) of principals said that they kept track of attendance if a pupil was regularly absent, while sanctions and positive encouragement were each mentioned by 9.52% of principals. Other measures used to deal with absenteeism included: constantly reminding pupils of the importance of attendance, having a school ethos of full attendance as the norm, and using the services of a Community Garda or Breaking the Cycle co-ordinator, while two principals reported that absenteeism was not a problem.

The vast majority (96.15%) of post-primary principals also reported that their school had specific measures in place to deal with occasional or persistent absenteeism. Of these, 76.92% said that they followed up on absences by phoning or writing to parents. Just over one third (34.62%) said that they informed the SAO or Gardaí, 30.77% said the HSCL officer or Year Head visited the home, 26.92% said they required a note from a parent explaining an absence and 23.08% said they monitored attendance, usually on a daily basis. Other measures used to deal with absenteeism were asking parents to visit the school, sending a registered letter to parents regarding absences, sending letters home at the end of every month detailing the number of days missed by pupils and running a chronic non-attenders project.

Table 6.3. Numbers and percentages of primary and post primary principals reporting different methods used in their school to deal with absenteeism.

Measures to deal with absenteeism	Primary school		Post-primary school	
	N	%	N	%
SAO/Gardaí informed	11	52.38	9	34.62
Contact/talk to parents	10	47.62	20	76.92
Note required/to be signed	7	33.33	7	26.92
HSCL/Year head visits home	6	28.57	8	30.77
Track or monitor attendance	4	19.05	5	19.23
Positive encouragement/rewards	2	9.52	0	0.00
Warnings or sanctions	2	9.52	0	0.00
Not a problem	2	9.52	0	0.00
Other	4	19.05	4	15.38

When asked if their school had been successful in dealing with absenteeism, almost half (48.15%) of the primary principals and 59.26% of the post-primary principals reported that their school had been somewhat successful (Table 6.4). Just under half (44.44%) of primary principals and 22.22% of post-primary principals reported that they had been very successful, while approximately 7.41% of primary principals and 3.70% of post-primary principals were unsure how successful the school had been. None of the primary principals, and 14.81% of the post-primary principals reported they had not really been successful in dealing with absenteeism.

Table 6.4. Numbers and percentages of principals reporting that they had been very, somewhat or not really successful in dealing with absenteeism, or were unsure.

Has the school been successful in dealing with absenteeism?	Primary school		Post-primary school	
	N	%	N	%
Very much so	12	44.44	6	22.22
Somewhat	13	48.15	16	59.26
Unsure	2	7.41	1	3.70
Not really	0	0.00	4	14.81

Principals were asked if they agreed that their school had sufficient resources to deal with absenteeism. Over half (51.85%) of the primary principals agreed somewhat that they had sufficient resources, while a further 18.52% strongly agreed (Table 6.5). Just under one fifth (18.52%) were unsure, while two principals (7.41%) somewhat disagreed and one (3.70%) strongly disagreed. In contrast, only 37.04% of post-primary principals either agreed somewhat or strongly agreed that they had sufficient resources to deal with absenteeism. Just under half (48.15%) of the principals either disagreed somewhat or strongly disagreed that their school had sufficient resources, while 14.81% were unsure whether they agreed or disagreed.

Table 6.5. Numbers and percentages of principals who reported that they strongly agreed, agreed somewhat, disagreed somewhat, strongly disagreed, or were unsure whether their school had sufficient resources to deal with absenteeism.

Sufficient resources to deal with absenteeism	Primary school		Post-primary school	
	N	%	N	%
Strongly agree	5	18.52	3	11.11
Agree somewhat	14	51.85	7	25.93
Unsure	5	18.52	4	14.81
Disagree somewhat	2	7.41	5	18.52
Strongly disagree	1	3.70	8	29.63

When asked what, if any, resources would help their school reduce the level of absenteeism, 22.73% of primary principals reported that extra personnel would help, while 13.64% reported that extra resources or finances would help (Table 6.6). Just under one tenth (9.09%) thought making the school more attractive or interesting would help reduce absenteeism. Other changes suggested included a change in curriculum structure, breakfast and homework clubs, keeping computerised records of attendance, encouraging parental interest in children’s education and progress, personally contacting parents to establish reasons for absences, and fostering a hope of a better future in parents and children. One principal reported that being included in the Dublin Corporation area would help, as the Gardaí were not able to allocate sufficient time to help the school deal with absenteeism, while one principal believed that nothing would work for some pupils, and one principal did not know what would help. Two principals referred to personnel currently working in the school as having helped to reduce the level of absenteeism – one mentioned the Breaking the Cycle Co-ordinator, while one mentioned the HSCL teacher.

Table 6.6. Numbers and percentages of principals reporting extra resources that would help reduce the level of absenteeism in their school.

Extra resources to help reduce absenteeism	Primary school		Post-primary school	
	N	%	N	%
More time to follow up absences	0	0.00	6	25.00
HSCL post	0	0.00	5	20.83
Extra teachers/personnel	5	22.73	4	16.67
Extra resources/finance	3	13.64	0	0.00
Individual to track absences/SAO	0	0.00	4	16.67
More remedial or learning support	0	0.00	3	12.50
School more attractive or interesting	2	9.09	0	0.00
Other	11	50.00	10	41.67
No problem/not applicable	5	22.73	3	12.50

One quarter of post-primary principals said that more time to follow up on absences would help reduce absenteeism, while 20.83% reported that a HSCL teacher would help (Table 6.6). Extra teachers or personnel and having someone who would track absences were each mentioned by 16.67% of principals, while 12.50% reported that having more remedial classes or learning support would help. Other factors that were mentioned included extra counselling hours, establishing agreement that Form

Teachers are responsible for following up absences, electronic record keeping, providing travel allowance for class tutors to visit students' homes, availability of courses such as the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, and some kind of incentives project. The role of the family was mentioned by four principals: one believed that having more time and space to deal with students and their parents would reduce absenteeism, one thought that more resources to educate and involve parents were needed, one thought that they needed to increase contact with parents, and one believed that absenteeism was linked with parental commitment. Three principals reported that absenteeism was not really a problem in their school.

Suspensions and Expulsions

The majority (75%) of primary school principals reported that no pupils had been suspended during the 1998/99 school year. Among the seven schools that had suspended pupils, the average number of suspensions was 11.57, with the number of suspensions ranging from one to 32 for individual schools. The average number of pupils suspended per school was 6.14, with the number ranging from one to 19 for individual schools. None of the rural principals reported suspending pupils, while five of the eight urban principals reported having done so, and two of the provincial principals had done so. Only one primary school principal (urban) reported having expelled a pupil during the 1998/99 school year.

In comparison to primary schools, principals in post-primary schools reported a much higher rate of both suspensions and expulsions. Only three schools had not suspended a student during the 1998/99 school year. Of the schools that had, the mean number of suspensions was 26, with the number ranging from none to 91 for individual schools. The mean number of students suspended was 19.22, and the number ranged from one to 80 students. School size was not significantly correlated with either number of suspensions ($r=.007, p=.97; ns$) or number of pupils suspended ($r=.13, p=.57; ns$). Only one post-primary school principal (provincial) reported that a student had been expelled from the school during the 1998/99 school year.

Table 6.7. Average number of suspensions and of pupils suspended reported by primary and post-primary principals

	Primary	Post-primary
Average number of suspensions	11.57	26.00
Average number of pupils suspended	6.14	19.22

Pupil and Family Characteristics

Several items examined pupil and parent characteristics. Both primary and post-primary principals were asked questions about remedial assistance and psychological assessment, disadvantage among pupils, continuation in education, pupils' interest in school work, alcohol and drug abuse among pupils, family background, and parental attitude to education.

Remedial Assistance and Psychological Assessment

Principals were asked to indicate the percentage of their current enrolment that had received remedial assistance and the percentage that they felt needed such assistance. Principals were also asked to indicate the percentage of pupils and students who had been referred for psychological assessment, and the percentage that they felt needed psychological assessment. On average, 19.34% of pupils in primary school were reported as having received remediation, with rates for individual schools ranging from 5% to 40% (Table 6.8). An average of 31.41% of pupils were reported as needing remediation, with rates ranging from 6% to 60%. Provincial principals reported the highest percentage of pupils in receipt of remediation (24.43%), but urban principals reported the highest percentage of pupils in need of remediation (44.29%).

On average 7.09% of pupils in primary school were reported as having been referred for psychological assessment, with rates for individual schools ranging from none to 20%. In contrast, an average of 11.69% of pupils were reported as needing psychological assessment, with rates ranging from none to 30%. Although there were no real differences between areas in terms of the percentage of pupils assessed, urban primary principals reported the highest number of pupils in need of assessment (15.64%).

On average, 12.11% of students were reported by post-primary principals as having received help from a remedial teacher, with rates for individual schools ranging from none to 45% (Table 6.8). In contrast, an average of 21.10% of students were reported as needing remedial assistance, with rates ranging from 3.50% to 60%. On average, 2.66% of students in post-primary schools had been referred for psychological assessment, with rates for individual schools ranging from none to 10%. An average of 6.31% of students were reported as needing psychological assessment, with rates ranging from none to 20%.

Urban post-primary principals reported higher rates of remediation (16.34% of students), and a larger percentage of students in need of remediation (30.46%) than did their rural or provincial counterparts. With regard to psychological assessment, urban principals also reported slightly more students as needing and as having received assessment (8.83% and 3.47%, respectively).

Table 6.8. Mean percentages of pupils receiving and in need of remedial assistance, and mean percentage of pupils who had been referred and needed to be referred for psychological assessment, as reported by primary and post-primary principals.

Mean percentage of pupils...	Primary school	Post-primary school
Receiving remedial assistance	19.34	12.11
Needing remedial assistance	31.41	21.10
Referred for psychological assessment	7.09	2.66
In need of psychological assessment	11.69	6.31

Disadvantage Among Pupils

Principals reported a high level of disadvantage among their pupils. On average, 72.52% of pupils in primary school were reported as being from a disadvantaged background, with responses ranging from 30% to 100% for individual schools. In contrast, only 50.16% of students in post-primary school were reported as being from a disadvantaged background, with responses ranging from 5% to 99% for individual schools. However, at primary level, there were marked differences by location, with urban principals rating 96.75% of pupils as from disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to the just under two-thirds of pupils rated as so by rural and provincial principals. At post-primary level, urban principals indicated that 56% of students were from disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to 44.20% rated as such by rural and 46.67% by provincial principals.

All of the primary principals and 96.30% of the post-primary principals reported that their school made some type of special provision for disadvantaged pupils. The vast majority (89.29%) of primary principals said that their school provided free book or book rental schemes to pupils, while half of the principals said that they provided a homework club or some type of homework assistance (Table 6.9). Just over one third (35.71%) said that they provided extra classes or activities, 28.57% had a HSCL or Breaking the Cycle co-ordinator and 21.43% subsidised activities or outings for disadvantaged pupils. Two principals said they had a resource or support

teacher, while one said they had a special class for travellers. Other provisions included special intervention programmes, courses for parents, a breakfast club, free transport to activities, and Early Start.

The vast majority (92.31%) of post-primary principals also said their school provided free book or book rental schemes for disadvantaged students (Table 6.9). One half of the principals said their school provided extra or special classes, while 23.08% said they had a HSCL co-ordinator or liased with the home in some other way, and 15.38% said they provided homework supervision or a homework club. Three principals said they had some type of counselling service or special support for pupils, while special classes (for refugees/asylum seekers and a pre-1st year class for weaker students) and resource or remedial teachers were each mentioned by two principals. Other provisions included art therapy for students with behavioural problems, an off campus centre for those at risk of dropping out, smaller class groups, study facilities and financial help for parents. A number of schools had special programmes, including an Early School Leavers/Disadvantaged programme, the Department of Education and Science's 8- to 15- Year Old Early School Leavers Initiative, and a special school and community programme.

Table 6.9. Numbers and percentages of primary principals reporting the types of provision in their school for disadvantaged pupils.

Type of provision in primary school for disadvantaged pupils	Primary school		Post-primary school	
	N	%	N	%
Free book/rental scheme	25	89.29	24	92.31
Homework club/assistance	14	50.00	4	15.38
Extra classes/activities	10	35.71	13	50.00
HSCL/BTC	8	28.57	6	23.08
Subsidised activities/outings	6	21.43	0	0.00
Special classes (travellers, refugees, pre-1 st year)	1	3.57	2	7.69
Counselling/pupil support	0	0.00	3	11.54
Resource or support teacher	2	7.14	2	7.69
Other	6	21.43	8	30.77

Continuation in Education and Interest in Schoolwork

Primary school principals were asked what percentage of pupils in their school did they expect would not transfer to post-primary school. On average, principals reported that less than one percent (0.33%) of pupils would not transfer, with responses ranging from none to 4% for individual schools. When asked to specify the main reasons why some pupils did not transfer to post-primary school, one third of principals mentioned family problems or situation while 27.78% mentioned low parental interest in education (Table 6.10). Only 16.67% believed that it was due to lack of interest on the part of the pupil.

Other reasons given included low educational attainment, academic and social difficulties, cultural issues (relating to the Traveller community), lack of incentives to stay on in education, schools not having enough resources for 'hands on' subjects and the availability of employment opportunities for early school leavers. One principal believed that some pupils found the transition to post-primary school very difficult, despite a transfer strategy being in place. Another principal said that parents who had not received an education themselves had a fear of the unknown, and thus did not encourage their children to continue in education.

Table 6.10. Numbers and percentages of primary principals who gave various reasons why pupils do not transfer to post-primary school.

Reasons for pupils not transferring to post-primary	N	%
Family problems/situation	6	33.33
Low parental interest in education	5	27.78
Lack of interest	3	16.67
Not applicable/all transfer	6	33.33
Other	10	55.56

When primary principals were asked what percentage of pupils in their school would, in their opinion, continue beyond Junior Certificate, the responses ranged from 30% to 100%. The average response was 71.33%. Principals were also asked what percentage of pupils they would expect to go on to third level education. On average, primary principals reported that they expected approximately one third (32.74%) of pupils to go on to third level, with responses ranging from 1% to 75%.

There were clear differences between the responses of principals from different locations, particularly with regard to third level education. For example, while urban

primary principals thought that 58.57% of their pupils would continue beyond Junior Certificate, rural principals believed that 78.15% would do so. Rural principals believed almost half (48.35%) of their pupils would attend third level, whereas provincial principals believed only 27.86% would do so. However, urban principals believed that only 4.79% of their pupils would attend third level.

Post-primary principals were also asked to specify what percentage of Junior Cycle students would, in their opinion, continue beyond Junior Certificate. The majority of principals (69.23%) said that they thought that more than 81% of their students would continue beyond Junior Certificate (Table 6.11). Just under one fifth (19.23%) of principals said they expected between 61-80% of students to do so, while only 11.54% said they expected between 41-60% of students to do so. Well over one third (38.46%) of post-primary principals believed that over 60% of their students would go on to third level education (Table 6.11). Just over one quarter (26.92%) believed that between 41-60% would do so, and 34.62% believed that less than 40% would do so. However, there were significant statistical differences by location ($\chi^2 = 19.38$; $df = 8$; $p < .01$), with the majority (54.55%) of urban principals expecting less than 20% of their students to continue their education onto third level, while 70% of rural and 60% of provincial principals believed that over 60% of their students would attend third level.

Table 6.11. Numbers and percentages of post-primary principals endorsing various options about the percentage of students who would, in their opinion, a) continue in school beyond the Junior Certificate, and b) continue to Third Level.

Percentage of Junior Cycle students who will continue beyond Junior Certificate					
	< 20%	21-40%	41-60%	61-80%	81% +
Number	0	0	3	5	18
Percentage	0.00	0.00	11.54	19.23	69.23
Percentage of students expected to go on to third level education					
	< 20%	21-40%	41-60%	61-80%	81% +
Number	6	3	7	8	2
Percentage	23.08	11.54	26.92	30.77	7.69

Principals were asked how many of their pupils, in their opinion, had little interest in schoolwork. There was very little difference between primary and post-primary principals. The majority of principals (81.48% of both primary and post-primary principals) said that they thought that less than 40% of pupils and students had

little interest in schoolwork (Table 6.12), while 14.81% of primary principals and 11.11% of post-primary principals said that between 40-60% had little interest. Only one primary principal and two post-primary principals said that over 60% of their enrolment had little interest in schoolwork.

Table 6.12. Numbers and percentages of principals reporting the percentage of their pupils who they perceived as having little interest in schoolwork.

Percentage of pupils and students with little interest in schoolwork										
	< 20%		21-40%		41-60%		61-80%		81% +	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary	11	40.74	11	40.74	4	14.81	1	3.70	0	0.00
Post-primary	13	48.15	9	33.33	3	11.11	1	3.70	1	3.70

Alcohol and Drug Abuse Among Pupils

Principals were asked to estimate the level of alcohol and drug abuse among their pupils, compared to typical pupils and students of the same age group. Primary principals were also asked what percentage of 6th class pupils in their school had, in their opinion, ever been drunk or tried illegal drugs, while post-primary principals were asked what percentage of third year students in their school, in their opinion, got drunk at least once a week and had ever tried illegal drugs

Over half (56%) of primary school principals believed that the level of alcohol abuse among their pupils was either below or well below average, while 24% of primary principals believed that the level of alcohol abuse was average, and 20% believed that it was above or well above average (Table 6.13). All rural primary principals described the level of alcohol abuse as either below or well below average, compared to 12.50% of urban and 33.33% of provincial principals.

In contrast, the majority (77.78%) of post-primary principals believed that the level of alcohol abuse among their students was average. Only 7.40% believed that it was below or well below average and 14.81% (all urban) believed that it was either above or well above average.

When asked about the level of drug abuse among their pupils, again the majority (60%) of primary school principals believed that it was either well below or below average compared to typical pupils of the same age group (Table 6.13). Less than one fifth (16%) believed the level of drug abuse among their pupils was average, while 24% believed it was above average. However, there were regional differences.

While all rural principals indicated that the level of abuse was well below average, none of the urban and only one of the provincial principals did so.

Table 6.13. Numbers and percentages of principals who said the level of alcohol and drug abuse among their pupils and students was well above average, above average, average, below average or well below average, compared to typical pupils and students of the same age group.

Level of alcohol abuse compared to typical pupils and students of the same age group										
	Well above average		Above average		Average		Below average		Well below average	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary	1	4.00	4	16.00	6	24.00	2	8.00	12	48.00
Post-primary	1	3.70	3	11.11	21	77.78	1	3.70	1	3.70
Level of drug abuse compared to typical pupils and students of the same age group										
	Well above average		Above average		Average		Below average		Well below average	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary	0	0.00	6	24.00	4	16.00	3	12.00	12	48.00
Post-primary	0	0.00	7	28.00	7	28.00	4	16.00	7	28.00

A smaller percentage (44%) of post-primary principals perceived the level of drug abuse among their students as either below or well below average. Over one quarter (28%) of post-primary principals believed that the level of drug abuse was average and the same percentage believed that it was above average. All those who reported above average levels of drug abuse were urban principals.

Primary school principals were asked what percentage of their 6th class pupils had, in their opinion, ever been drunk. Eighty percent (including all rural principals) thought that less than 20% of their 6th class pupils had ever been drunk, while 8% thought that between 21-40% had been so, and 12% thought that between 41-60% had been so (Table 6.14). When asked what percentage of their 6th year pupils had tried illegal drugs, 80% (including all rural principals) said that less than 20% of pupils had done so, while 20% thought that between 21-40% of pupils had done so (Table 6.14).

Table 6.14. Numbers and percentages of primary principals who said that a particular percentage of 6th class pupils have ever been drunk or taken illegal drugs.

Percentage of 6 th class pupils who have ever been drunk					
	< 20%	21-40%	41-60%	61-80%	81% +
Number	20	2	3	0	0
Percentage	80.00	8.00	12.00	0.00	0.00
Percentage of 6 th class pupils who have ever taken illegal drugs					
	< 20%	21-40%	41-60%	61-80%	81% +
Number	20	5	0	0	0
Percentage	80.00	20.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Post-primary principals were asked what percentage of third year students in their school, in their opinion, got drunk at least once a week. Seventy-six percent reported that less than 20% of their students had done so, while a further 20% reported that between 21-40% had done so (Table 6.15). Only one principal thought that between 40-60% of pupils got drunk on a weekly basis and none thought that over 60% of their students did so.

Post-primary principals were asked what percentage of their third year students had tried illegal drugs, and again the majority (70.83%) said that less than 20% of their students had ever tried illegal drugs, while a further 25.00% said that between 21-40% had done so (Table 6.15). Only one (4.17%) principal said that between 61-80% of their students had taken illegal drugs. All those principals who thought that more than 20% of their third year had taken drugs were urban principals.

Table 6.15. Numbers and percentages of post-primary principals who said that a particular percentage of third year students got drunk at least once a week and had ever tried illegal drugs.

Percentage of third year students who got drunk at least once a week					
	< 20%	21-40%	41-60%	61-80%	81% +
Number	19	5	1	0	0
Percentage	76.00	20.00	4.00	0.00	0.00
Percentage of third year students who had ever tried illegal drugs					
	< 20%	21-40%	41-60%	61-80%	81% +
Number	17	6	0	1	0
Percentage	70.83	25.00	0.00	4.17	0.00

Family Background and Parental Attitude to Education

Principals were asked several items concerning their perception of pupils' family background and parents' attitude to education. Almost half (48.15%) of primary school principals thought that less than 40% of their pupils had a home background that seriously interfered with their ability to learn effectively (Table 6.16). Just over one quarter (25.43%) thought that between 41-60% of their pupils came from such a home background and 25.92% of principals thought it was true of over 60% of their pupils.

Two-thirds of post-primary principals believed that less than 40% of their students had a home background that interfered with their ability to learn effectively, while 14.81% thought this was true of between 41-60% of students. Just under one in five (18.52%) thought it was true of over 60% of students.

Principals were asked what percentage of the parents of pupils and students in their school were, in their opinion, interested in their children's education. The majority (57.14%) of primary principals believed that over 60% of parents of pupils in their school were interested in their children's education, while 28.57% of principals believed it was true of 41-60% of parents and only 14.29% of principals believed it was true of less than 40% of parents. (Table 6.16).

Principals in post-primary schools reported that a higher percentage of parents of students in their school were interested in their children's' education, with 70.37% of principals reporting that this was true of over 60% of parents. Just under one quarter (22.22%) of principals believed that this was true of between 41-60% of parents, while only 7.41% believed that this was true of less than 40% of parents.

In contrast to parental *interest*, principals reported that a smaller percentage of parents *actively encouraged and supported* their children's education. The most common response (39.29%) among primary principals was that between 41-60% of parents supported and encouraged their children's education. Almost one third (32.14%) of the principals thought that less than 40% of parents did so, and 28.57% of principals thought that over 60% of parents did so (all but one of whom were rural principals).

More than half (55.56%) of the principals in post-primary schools believed that over 60% of parents actively encouraged and supported their children's education. Just under one fifth (18.52%) believed that between 41-60% of parents did so and 25.92% believed that under 40% of parents did so.

Table 6.16. Numbers and percentages of principals who endorsed each of five options on their perceptions of the percentage of current pupils whose a) home background interfered with their ability to learn effectively, b) parents were interested in their education and c) parents actively encouraged and supported their education.

Percentage of...	Percentage Categories											
	< 20%		21-40%		41-60%		61-80%		81% +			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
pupils with home background which interferes with their ability to learn effectively	6	22.22	7	25.93	7	25.93	4	14.81	3	11.11		
parents who are interested in their children's education	11	40.74	7	25.93	4	14.81	5	18.52	0	0.00		
parents who actively encourage and support their children's education	0	0.00	4	14.29	8	28.57	13	46.43	3	10.71		
	0	0.00	2	7.41	6	22.22	7	25.93	12	44.44		
	2	7.14	7	25.00	11	39.29	7	25.00	1	3.57		
	1	3.70	6	22.22	5	18.52	10	37.04	5	18.52		

Community Characteristics

Principals were asked several questions about the local community: the level of alcohol abuse, crime and unemployment, the proportion of single parent families compared to the country as a whole, the importance attached to education, supports for early school leavers and potential early school leavers, services providing links between the school and local community, and the availability of a number of amenities.

Community Characteristics

The majority (59.26%) of the primary principals (and all of the urban principals) perceived the level of alcohol abuse in their school's local community to be either above or well above average compared to the country as a whole (Table 6.15). Just under one third of primary principals believed that the level of alcohol abuse was average, while just over one tenth (11.11%) believed that it was below average. In contrast, the majority of post-primary principals (62.96%) believed that the level of alcohol abuse in their school's local community was average, while 33.34% believed that it was either above or well above average and 3.70% believed that it was below average (Table 6.17).

When asked about the level of crime in the school's local community, compared to the country as a whole, primary and post-primary principals gave similar responses. Just under one half (42.86%) of primary principals believed that it was either above or well above average, 28.57% reported it as well below average, while 14.29% believed it was below average and the same percentage believed it was average (Table 6.17). Urban and provincial principals were more likely to describe the crime rate as high than were their rural counterparts. While 87.50% of urban and 71.43% of provincial principals described it as either above or well above average, none of the rural principals did so.

The level of crime was described as either well above average or above average by 40.74% of post-primary principals, while 18.52% described it as average, and 40.74% described it as below or well below average. Urban post-primary principals were more likely to describe the level of crime as above or well above average, with 83.3% characterising it as so, compared to 20% of provincial and none of the rural principals.

Table 6.17. Numbers and percentages of principals who endorsed various options about the level of alcohol abuse, crime, unemployment and lone parent families in the school's local community, compared to the country as a whole.

	Well above average		Above average		Average		Below average		Well below average		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Level of alcohol abuse	Primary	5	18.52	11	40.74	8	29.63	1	3.70	2	7.41
	Post-primary	2	7.41	7	25.93	17	62.96	1	3.70	0	0.00
Level of crime	Primary	6	21.43	6	21.43	4	14.29	4	14.29	8	28.57
	Post-primary	4	14.81	7	25.93	5	18.52	8	29.63	3	11.11
Level of unemployment	Primary	12	42.86	11	39.29	4	14.29	0	0.00	1	3.57
	Post-primary	8	29.63	8	29.63	5	18.52	6	22.22	0	0.00
Proportion of lone parent families	Primary	11	39.29	6	21.43	4	14.29	4	14.29	3	10.71
	Post-primary	6	22.22	9	33.33	8	29.63	4	14.81	0	0.00

The vast majority (82.15%) of primary principals thought that the level of unemployment in the school's community was either well above or above average compared to the country as a whole (Table 6.17). The level of unemployment was described as average by 14.29% of principals, while just one (rural) principal (3.57%) thought that it was well below average. The majority of post-primary principals (59.26%) also believed that the level of unemployment was either well above or above average, while 18.52% believed it was average and 22.22% believed it was below average. However, urban post-primary principals were more likely to characterise unemployment as above or well above average (83.33%, compared to 40% of both rural and provincial principals).

Principals were asked about the proportion of lone parent families in the school's local community, compared to the country as a whole. The majority (60.72%) of primary principals perceived it to be either well above or above average, while 14.29% believed it was average and 25.00% believed it was either below or well below average (Table 6.17). All of those who described the proportion of lone parents as average or below average were rural principals.

Over half (55.55%) of the post-primary principals believed that the proportion of lone parent families in the school's community was well above or above average, while 29.63% believed it was average and 14.81% believed it was below average. Again, more urban (83.33%) than rural (20%) or provincial (60%) post-primary principals characterised the proportion as above or well above average.

Importance of Education

Principals were asked whether they agreed that the community from which their pupils were drawn attached sufficient importance to education. The majority (60.71%) of primary principals disagreed that sufficient importance was attached to education, while only 32.14% of primary principals either agreed or strongly agreed that sufficient importance was attached to education (Table 6.18). In contrast, a higher percentage (64.00%) of post-primary principals thought that sufficient importance was attached to education, while 28.00% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. All post-primary principals who strongly disagreed were from urban schools.

Table 6.18. Numbers and percentages of principals who strongly agreed, agreed, didn't know, disagreed, or strongly disagreed that sufficient importance was attached to education in the local community.

Sufficient importance attached to education in local community										
	Strongly agree		Agree		Don't know		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary	3	10.71	6	21.43	2	7.14	17	60.71	0	0.00
Post-primary	6	24.00	10	40.00	2	8.00	3	12.00	4	16.00

Local Supports for Early School Leavers

Over half (55.56%) of the primary principals reported that there were supports in place locally for early school leavers. However, only 33.33% of rural principals reported that such supports were in place, compared to 75% of urban and 71.43% of provincial principals. In contrast, a higher percentage (77.78%) of post-primary principals reported there were support in place locally for early school leavers.

Among the primary principals who reported that there were supports for early school leavers, the majority (68.75%) referred to Youthreach, while 50% referred to specific local initiatives (Table 6.19). Three principals reported that there was an Early School Leavers Initiative programme in their area, while one principal referred to Foróige as a local source of support for early school leavers.

Of the post-primary principals who reported that there were local supports for early school leavers, 71.43% referred to FÁS or Youthreach, 42.86% referred to specific local initiatives and 23.81% referred to an Early School Leavers Initiative programme or some other programme funded by the Department of Education and Science. Other types of local support for early school leavers included Juvenile Liaison Officer schemes, Youth programmes, Access programmes, and Obair.

Table 6.19. Numbers and percentages of primary and post-primary principals referring to supports in place locally for early school leavers.

Supports	Primary school		Post-primary school	
	N	%	N	%
FÁS/Youthreach	11	68.75	15	71.43
Local Initiatives	8	50.00	9	42.86
ESLI or other DES Schemes	3	18.75	5	23.81
Other	1	6.25	5	23.81

Principals were also asked if there were supports in place locally for young people who were *potential* early school leavers. Only 39.29% of primary principals and 54.17% of post-primary principals reported that there was some kind of local support for potential early school leavers. However, fewer rural principals, at both primary and post-primary level, reported local supports. Only 7.69% of rural primary principals reported that such supports were in place, compared to 57.14% of provincial and 75% of urban principals. At post-primary level, 33.33% of rural principals reported supports in place locally, compared to 54.55% of urban and 100% of provincial principals.

Of the primary school principals who reported that there was such support locally, the majority (63.64%) referred to a local initiative, while 54.55% referred to the 8- to 15- Year Old Early School Leavers Initiative (Table 6.20). Other types of support included a support worker from the local Partnership, Foróige, Family Support Team and liaison between primary and post-primary schools.

Of the post-primary school principals who reported there was support locally for potential early school leavers, 50% referred to a local scheme, 33.33% referred to a Department of Education and Science scheme and 25% referred to Youthreach or Community Training Workshops (Table 6.20). Other types of support for potential early school leavers included in-school and off-campus support centres, an early school leavers/disadvantaged programme funded by the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, homework schemes, Obair, and a JLO scheme.

Table 6.20. Numbers and percentages of primary and post-primary principals referring to supports in place locally for potential early school leavers.

Supports	Primary school		Post-primary school	
	N	%	N	%
Local Initiatives	7	63.64	6	50.00
8- to 15- ESLI	6	54.55	4	33.33
Youthreach	0	0.00	3	25.00
Other	3	27.27	5	41.67

In order to examine the integration of services, principals were asked if their school had links with the local community in relation to the provision of a range of services, from after school homework classes to community work schemes. Over half (57.14%) of primary principals and 38.46% of post-primary principals reported that there were links between their school and the community in the provision of after-

school homework classes (Table 6.21). Almost half (42.86%) of primary principals and 34.78% of the post-primary principals mentioned links relating to community work schemes and 28.57% of primary principals and 37.50% of post-primary principals mentioned links relating to early school leavers programmes.

Over half (56.00%) of the post-primary principals mentioned links with the community in the provision of career guidance classes. Other types of services which were mentioned by primary principals as linking school and community were football and youth club activities, evening classes run in the school, Family Support Teams, Foróige, and the involvement of parents in school-based programmes such as Stay Safe and Drugs Awareness. Other types of services mentioned by post-primary school principals as linking the school with the community were the work of the HSCL co-ordinator, the work placements of pupils on LCA/LCVP and Transition Year programmes, a paired reading programme, a summer project, Youthreach Training, sports coaching, and adult education.

Table 6.21. Numbers and percentages of primary and post-primary principals referring to existing links between the school and community in relation to provision of services.

Services	Primary school		Post-primary school	
	N	%	N	%
After-school homework classes	16	57.14	10	38.46
Community work schemes	12	42.86	8	34.78
Early school leavers programs	8	28.57	9	37.50
Career guidance classes	0	0.00	14	56.00
Other	6	21.43	7	46.67

Amenities in the Local Community

Principals were asked how well, in their opinion, their school’s local community was served by a number of amenities: shops, restaurant, community centre, activities for teenagers, sports facilities, cinemas, public transport and accessible social services. There were large differences in the responses of primary and post-primary principals in relation to the shops in the local community. A much higher percentage of post-primary principals (85.19%) than of primary principals (42.85%) reported that the local community was either fairly well or very well served by shops (Table 6.22). Over half (57.14%) of primary principals but only 14.82% of post-primary principals reported that it was either not well or very badly served by shops.

Large differences were also found between primary and post-primary principals in relation to their perception of how well served the local community was by restaurants. The vast majority (82.15%) of primary school principals, but only 42.31% of post-primary principals believed that the community was either not well or very badly served by restaurants. Less than one fifth of primary principals (17.86%) and over a quarter of post-primary principals reported the community was fairly well served. While almost one third (30.77%) of post-primary principals believed the local community to be very well served by restaurants, none of the primary principals believed this to be true.

Differences were less striking in relation to community centres. Just over one half (53.57%) of primary principals and 66.66% of post-primary principals believed that the community was either very well or well served by community centre, while 46.43% of primary principals and 33.33% of post-primary principals believed that it was either not well or very badly served.

Approximately three-quarters of the respondents (75.00% of primary and 74.07% of post-primary principals) reported that the local community was either not well or very badly served by activities for teenagers. One quarter of primary principals and 14.81% of post-primary principals thought the community was fairly well served, while three of the post-primary principals but none of the primary principals thought that it was very well served.

The majority of primary principals (64.28%) reported that the local community was either not well or very badly served by sports facilities, compared to only 40.74% of the post-primary principals. Approximately one third of the respondents (32.14% of post-primary principals and 33.33% of post-primary principals) believed that the local community was fairly well served, while one quarter of post-primary principals but only one primary principal believed that it was very well served by sports facilities.

None of the primary principals but 26.92% of post-primary principals described the community as being well served by cinemas, while 85.58% of primary principals and only 57.69% of post-primary principals reported that the community was either not well or very badly served by cinemas. Similar percentages of primary and post-primary principals (14.29% and 15.38%, respectively) reported that the community was fairly well served. The main difference lies in the percentages of principals reporting that the community was very well served – this was reported by 26.92% of post-primary principals but by none of the primary principals.

Table 6.22. Numbers and percentages of principals endorsing various options about how well served the local community was by a number of amenities

Amenities		Primary school		Post-primary school	
		N	%	N	%
Shops	Very well	3	10.71	13	48.15
	Fairly well	9	32.14	10	37.04
	Not well	7	25.00	2	7.41
	Very badly	9	32.14	2	7.41
Restaurants	Very well	0	0.00	8	30.77
	Fairly well	5	17.86	7	26.92
	Not well	5	17.86	5	19.23
	Very badly	18	64.29	6	23.08
Community centre	Very well	5	17.86	6	22.22
	Fairly well	10	35.71	12	44.44
	Not well	5	17.86	6	22.22
	Very badly	8	28.57	3	11.11
Activities for teenagers	Very well	0	0.00	3	11.11
	Fairly well	7	25.00	4	14.81
	Not well	13	46.43	14	51.85
	Very badly	8	28.57	6	22.22
Sports facilities	Very well	1	3.57	7	25.93
	Fairly well	9	32.14	9	33.33
	Not well	9	32.14	7	25.93
	Very badly	9	32.14	4	14.81
Cinemas	Very well	0	0.00	7	26.92
	Fairly well	4	14.29	4	15.38
	Not well	6	21.43	5	19.23
	Very badly	18	64.29	10	38.46
Public transport	Very well	0	0.00	8	29.63
	Fairly well	10	38.46	13	48.15
	Not well	7	26.92	5	18.52
	Very badly	9	34.62	1	3.70
Accessible social services	Very well	1	3.70	6	22.22
	Fairly well	9	33.33	16	59.26
	Not well	10	37.04	3	11.11
	Very badly	7	25.93	2	7.41

There were also large differences in relation to public transport. Well over half (61.54%) of primary principals and only 22.22% of post-primary principals believed that the local community was either not well or very badly served by public transport, while 38.46% of primary principals and 48.15% of post-primary principals believed that it was fairly well served. Almost one third (29.63%) of post-primary principals but none of the primary principals believed that the local community was very well served by public transport.

Difference between the responses of primary and post-primary principals were again striking in relation to accessible social services. Primary principals were more than three times as likely as post-primary principals to report that the local community was either not well or very badly served by accessible social services (62.97% compared to 18.52%, respectively). One third of primary principals and 59.26% of post-primary principals believed that the local community was fairly well served by social services, while 22.22% of the post-primary principals but only one primary principal believed it was very well served.

Overall, a much higher percentage of primary principals than of post-primary principals reported that the local community was well served by shops, restaurants, community centre, sports facilities, cinemas, public transport and accessible social services. The only exception was activities for teenagers, which the majority of both primary and post-primary principals reported were lacking in the local community. The amenities which both primary and post-primary principals thought were most lacking in the local communities were activities for teenagers, restaurants and cinemas. Primary principals reported that the amenities by which the local community was best served were community centres and shops, while post-primary principals reported that the local community was best served by shops and accessible social services.

Summary

The majority of primary schools had a mixed sex enrolment, with an average of 177.4 pupils, and average attendance of 88.56%. Seventy-five percent of principals reported that no pupils had been suspended during the 1998/99 school year. Post-primary schools were mainly of mixed sex enrolment, with an average of 621.29 students, an average attendance rate of 84.86%, and an average dropout rate during Junior Cycle of 2.36 students. Only three post-primary principals had not suspended a student in the 1998/99 school year, while only one reported expelling a student.

Nearly three-quarters of pupils in the primary schools sampled were reported to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, with all of the principals reporting some form of provision for disadvantaged pupils. Just over 50% of students in the post-primary schools sampled were reported to be from disadvantaged backgrounds, with over 96% of principals making provision for them. Primary school principals believed that over 70% of their pupils would complete the Junior Certificate, while nearly 70% of post-primary school principals believed that the majority of their students would complete the Junior Certificate.

When asked about the level of drug and alcohol use among their enrolment, both primary and post-primary rural principals typically described the levels as below average, whereas urban and provincial principals typically described the levels as average or above average. The majority of primary school principals believed that the level of alcohol abuse, unemployment, and lone-parent families in their school's local community was above average, while less than half believed the level of crime was above average. Approximately one-third reported that sufficient importance was attached to education by the local community, while a majority believed that the area was badly served by shops, restaurants, activities for teenagers, cinemas, public transport, and accessible social services.

The majority of post-primary principals believed that the level of alcohol abuse in the local community was average, while the level of unemployment and lone-parent families was above average. Sixty-four percent believed sufficient importance was placed on education by the local community. The majority also believed the area was well served by shops, restaurants, community centres, sports facilities, public transport, and accessible social services.

7. Discussion

Organisation of the Chapter

In this chapter the main findings are discussed and compared to findings of other Irish and international research. All characteristics of early school leavers that distinguished them from persisters are discussed. However, particular attention is directed at the selection of the most suitable variables for inclusion in a template.

Comparison data were not always available (for example, teachers did not return data on those in the comparison group). Nonetheless, some data for which there are no comparisons are discussed, because they provide a more rounded picture of the characteristics of early school leavers than that gained by self-report alone.

As in Chapter 1, analysis is at the level of the individual, the school and the wider environment. Some of the post-dropout experiences of interviewees are also discussed. Discussion of differences between the two groups is followed by an outline of variables that appear most suitable for inclusion in a template. Finally, limitations of the study are discussed.

Summary of Characteristics of Early School Leavers

Table 7.1 shows the characteristics on which the early school leavers differed significantly from the comparison group. These include family characteristics, and experiences in primary and post-primary education. The characteristics in the table represent *all* significant differences found, rather than merely those variables proposed for inclusion in a template.

Table 7.1. Summary of significant differences between early school leavers and students in the comparison group.

Family Characteristics	
Family size	Greater number of siblings.
Parental education	Lower level of both maternal and paternal educational attainment.
Paternal employment status	Higher percentage of fathers unemployed.
Primary School Experiences	
Absenteeism	More reported absences and main reason for absences more likely to be 'not wanting to go' or 'mitching'.
Poor school performance	Lower perceived ability at lessons, more likely to view not being able to understand as a negative aspect of school.
Retention in grade	More likely to be retained at a grade level.
Behaviour	In trouble with teacher more frequently, higher prevalence of smoking.
Suspension	Higher incidence of suspension.
Post-primary School Experiences	
Absenteeism	More reported absences and main reason for absences more likely to be 'not wanting to go' or 'mitching'.
Poor school performance	Lower perceived ability at lessons, more likely to view not being good at lessons as a negative aspect of school.
Preferred subjects	More likely to prefer practical subjects and mathematics, less likely to prefer science, more likely to prefer subjects because they do not involve reading.
Attitude to school	Less likely to enjoy school, higher level of dissatisfaction with teachers, more likely to cite relationship with specific teacher as positive aspect, more likely to view interest in books and less likely to view getting on with others and determination as characteristics needed to do well in school.
Behaviour	In trouble with teachers and messing in class more frequently, higher prevalence of smoking, more likely to be in trouble with Gardaí.
Suspension	Higher incidence of suspension.
Expulsion	Higher incidence of expulsion.

Individual Pupil and Family Characteristics

A number of individual and family characteristics were found to be associated with early school leaving. These will be discussed in this section, as will the school experiences of the early school leavers.

Individual Characteristics

In keeping with previous research (Hannan & O’Riain, 1993; McCoy et al., 1999; Rumberger, 1995) early school leavers were more likely to be male than female. Of those interviewed, 70.37% were male and 29.63% female, while, of the total number who were tracked, 58.66% were male and 41.34% were female.

Only two of the female early leavers interviewed were mothers, and neither of these gave pregnancy as their reason for leaving school. Indeed, teachers indicated that only two of the total sample tracked dropped out because of pregnancy. Thus, female early school leavers tracked in this study would appear to have a lower rate of motherhood than that found in other Irish (Hannan & O’Riain, 1993) and American research (Schwartz, 1995).

Family Background

There were no statistically significant differences between the early school leavers and the comparison group on social class, despite previous research indicating that it is highly predictive of dropping out (Hannan & O’Riain, 1993; Rumberger, 1995). This may largely be due to the nature of the sample chosen, all of whom were selected from disadvantaged or Breaking the Cycle schools. As the sample was predominantly from a working class background, it did not show the spread of social class that would be found in a more representative sample.

Early school leavers were significantly more likely than the comparison group to report that their father was unemployed (41.18% compared to 17.14%), although there were no differences for maternal employment status. Educational attainment for both mothers and fathers was significantly lower among the early school leavers than among the comparison group. A higher percentage of the comparison group (32.50%) than of the early school leavers (11.11%) said that their father had, at a minimum, completed the Group or Intermediate Certificate. The difference was even more striking in relation to mothers’ education, with 42.50% of the comparison group but only 5.55% of the early school leavers group saying that their mother had completed a

state examination. These findings are similar to those of other studies (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger, 1983).

Family Size and Composition

On average, early school leavers had more siblings than students in the comparison group (4.83 compared to 3.18), which is in keeping with previous research (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). Although a smaller proportion of early school leavers than of the comparison group lived with both parents, the difference was not statistically significant. However, the percentage from each group living in a household headed by a lone-parent was higher than the national average (Central Statistics Office, 1997), suggesting that the disadvantaged nature of the sample may have minimised differences between the two groups. Other research has found that students from two-parent families are less likely than students from other family types to drop out (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger, 1983), and a more representative sample may have shown a significant difference for lone-parents.

The majority of early school leavers lived with both parents, supporting Barrington and Hendricks (1989) questioning of the assumption that the typical dropout is from a 'broken home'. They found that although a lower percentage of their sample of American dropouts than of graduates lived in families with two parents, more than two-thirds were living at home with two parents at the beginning of the ninth grade.

Family Context

While early school leavers were not asked directly about their parents' attitudes to education, several questions indirectly addressed the issue. A higher percentage of the comparison group (92.50%) than of the early school leavers (79.63%) had been encouraged by someone at home to go to post-primary school, although this difference was not significant. Approximately half of the early leavers said that a parent had tried to persuade them to remain in school, suggesting that, for the other half, there was a lack of active parental support and encouragement for continuation in education. When asked how their parents had reacted to them leaving school, approximately one in eight early leavers said that their parents were not upset by their decision or said it was their own choice.

Teachers rated a minimum of one quarter of early school leavers' parents as uninterested in their children's education, with primary teachers rating one third of

fathers this way. Furthermore, while most parents attended parent-teacher meetings while their children were in primary school, one third never attended a post-primary school parent-teacher meeting. Thus, reports from both teachers and early school leavers suggest that a significant percentage of parents of early school leavers did not place a high value on education.

This is in keeping with previous research. Rumberger (1995) found that of several family process factors, academic support was the most powerful predictor of early school leaving. Barrington and Hendricks (1989) have argued that the high accuracy with which elementary schools in their study identified potential dropouts probably reflects family attitudes to education. The same may be true of the present study. For example, parents are likely to have been aware of the high rate of absenteeism in primary school, particularly in the lower grades. Barrington and Hendricks suggest that parents who are uninterested in their child's attendance in elementary school are likely not only to convey their values to their children, but also are unlikely to offer resistance when the child later decides to leave school.

Experience in School

Early school leavers' experiences in school were characterised by poor school performance, grade retention, absenteeism, negative attitudes toward school, misbehaviour, and incidences of suspension and expulsion. In keeping with other research (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Janosz et al., 1997), differences between the early leavers and stay-ins were greater in post-primary than in primary school. Nonetheless, a number of factors distinguished early school leavers from the comparison group in primary school, indicating the beginnings of what Rumberger (1995) calls the "long-term process of disengagement from school" (p. 618).

Poor School Performance

Early school leavers were significantly more likely to rate themselves as of below average ability at lessons, and to report not being able to understand things or not being good at schoolwork, in both primary and post-primary school. Teachers' ratings also indicated that early school leavers displayed academic problems from an early age. Averaged subject ratings indicated that over half were rated as below average or very poor in primary school, while almost two-thirds were rated this way in post-primary school. Academic problems among early school leavers were even more

evident from examination results, with 75.68% of those who took an entrance examination for post-primary school reported as scoring below average.

These findings are consistent with previous research, which has found that academic problems in elementary school (Alexander et al., 1997) and both teacher and student ratings of academic performance (Rumberger, 1995) predict school dropout. Furthermore, achievement test scores among early school leavers tend to be below the level that would be expected on the basis of the student's general scholastic ability (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989), a factor that may explain why early school leavers in the present study fared worse on entrance examinations than self-report and teachers' ratings of their scholastic ability would suggest.

Overall, there was a tendency for early school leavers to rate their ability more positively than teachers rated it, and this was true at both primary and post-primary school level. It may be that teacher ratings are a more accurate reflection of early school leavers' ability, given the evidence of entrance examination results. Social desirability bias may also have been a factor, since the early school leavers were asked questions about themselves in face-to-face interviews, whereas teachers were asked questions about a third party in mailed questionnaires.

Although a higher percentage of early school leavers (42.56%) than of the comparison group (25.00%) had received remedial assistance in primary school, the difference was not statistically significant. Similar percentages of early leavers and the comparison group had been in a special education, in contrast to previous studies which found a significant link between early school leaving and special education (Alexander et al., 1997).

Retention in a Grade

Early school leavers were significantly more likely than the comparison group to have been retained at a grade level in primary school, supporting the findings of earlier research (Rumberger, 1995). Although there is evidence that being held back in the upper grades is more detrimental than being held back in the lower grades (Granville, 1982; Kaufman & Brady, 1992), it is not possible to ascertain if this was the case in the present study, as insufficient numbers of the comparison group were retained to make comparison possible.

Responses from teachers, while incomplete in relation to retention, suggest that at least half of those who were retained were retained in Junior Infants. This is in keeping with retention patterns nationally (Department of Education and Science,

1999). However, the self-reports of early school leavers suggest that grade retention occurred across all grade levels, with almost half reporting being retained at either Senior Infants or 3rd class, and less than 10% reporting being retained in Junior Infants. Given the disparity between the responses of teachers and early school leavers, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions about the relationship between the grade level at which retention occurred and early school leaving.

Absenteeism

In keeping with previous research (Alexander et al., 1997; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Greaney & Kellaghan, 1984; Rumberger, 1995), early school leavers reported having been absent from school significantly more frequently than the comparison group in both primary and post-primary school. Almost one fifth said they had missed days a few times a week in primary school, while just under a half said they had done so in post-primary school.

Teachers' reports reveal a higher rate of absenteeism among early school leavers at Junior Infants and 6th class than at other grade levels in primary school. Thus, not only is absenteeism more prevalent among early school leavers, but the problem is apparent as early as Junior Infants.

Early school leavers were significantly more likely to say that they missed school, at both primary and post-primary level, because they did not want to go or were mitching. This suggests that not only is absenteeism more common among early leavers, but the nature of those absences differs for those who stay in school and those who leave early.

Although one fifth of the early school leavers had been contacted by the SAO or Gardaí while in primary school, this did not include any students in rural areas. This suggests that smaller rural schools were less likely to use or perhaps to have access to the services of the Gardaí in dealing with absenteeism.

Attitude to School

There was only a small difference between early school leavers and the comparison group in their level of satisfaction with primary school, with the majority of interviewees in both groups saying that they had enjoyed primary school. However, significant differences were found in relation to satisfaction with post-primary school, with early leavers significantly less likely than the comparison group to say they had enjoyed it (51.86% compared to 92.5%).

The difference between primary and post-primary school may be due to structural differences (e.g. post-primary schools are larger, with more teachers and pupils and less personalised relationships with teachers). Indeed, while almost half of the early leavers, when asked what they liked about primary school, said that most or all of the teachers were 'nice', just over one tenth said the same of post-primary school. It is also possible that the differences are due to pupils being further along the 'disengagement process'. However, the fact that over half of the early school leavers said that they had enjoyed post-primary school suggests that for many adolescents, the decision to leave school early is grounded in reasons other than disengagement from school.

Compared to self-reports, both primary and post-primary teachers were more likely to rate the early school leavers as not having enjoyed school. For example, two-thirds of the early leavers believed by teachers not to have enjoyed primary school had said themselves that they had enjoyed it. Thus, there is considerable disparity between the teacher ratings and self-reports of early leavers.

Behaviour

Early school leavers were significantly more likely than students in the comparison group to have behaved disruptively in school. Furthermore, male early school leavers were significantly more likely than females to be perceived by teachers as having displayed problematic classroom behaviour. So too were early school leavers in urban areas compared to those in provincial and rural areas.

Based on both self-reports and reports of primary and post-primary teachers, misbehaviour was more frequent in post-primary than in primary school. For example, approximately 40% of early school leavers reported getting in trouble and acting up in class on a weekly or daily basis in primary school, while 61% reported doing so in post-primary school. Similarly, while 63.89% were reported by primary teachers as being well-behaved in class, only 42.86% were reported as being so by post-primary teachers. Furthermore, 13.54% were described by primary teachers as having displayed aggressive behaviour, while 30.56% were reported by post-primary teachers as having displayed aggressive or uncontrollable behaviour. These findings are in keeping with previous research (Alexander et al., 1997; Rumberger, 1995).

A comparison of these findings with the results of a survey conducted among primary school teachers (INTO, 1993) indicates that the level of disruptive behaviour among early school leavers was higher than among pupils in general. The findings

suggest that in many cases, the pattern of disruptive behaviour begins in primary school, but becomes more pronounced in post-primary school. However, it is also worth noting that approximately half of the early school leavers said that they had rarely or never 'messed' in class while in primary school, and that a majority were characterised as well-behaved by primary school teachers.

Early school leavers were significantly more likely than stay-ins to report having been in trouble with the police, which is in keeping with the findings of previous research (Gaustad, 1991; Janosz et al., 1997; Schwartz, 1995). More than one in ten early school leavers had found themselves in this situation while in primary school, and one quarter while in post-primary school.

Suspension and Expulsion

Early leavers were significantly more likely than those who remained in school to report having been suspended or expelled, a finding that has been noted elsewhere (Janosz et al., 1997; Schwartz, 1995). Almost one fifth of the early school leavers had been suspended in primary school, while half reported having been suspended in post-primary school. Those in rural areas were least likely to have been suspended, based on both self-report and teacher reports.

Early school leavers were more likely than teachers to report having been suspended in primary school. There was higher level of agreement in reports of suspensions in post-primary school, although teachers were slightly more likely to report that the early school leavers had been suspended. There was a high level of agreement regarding the reasons for suspension, although early school leavers were more likely to report that they had been suspended in post-primary school for mitching. This finding is of interest in light of the view of the National Economic and Social Forum (1997) that dealing with non-attendance by means of out-of-school suspensions only aggravates student difficulties and may be a means of removing the problem rather than solving it.

While none of the early school leavers had been expelled in primary school, one quarter said they had been expelled in post-primary school. Location was also significantly linked to expulsion: none of the rural early leavers reported having been expelled, compared to 40% of those in provincial areas, and one third in urban areas. There were major discrepancies between early school leavers' and teachers' reports of expulsion. While one fifth of the early school leavers gave expulsion as the reason they had left school, teacher reports indicated that none of them had been expelled.

There is a distinct difference of opinion between early school leavers and teachers regarding what constitutes expulsion, a difference that has also been commented on by others. For example, McCormack (1999) commented that although 23% of 15-year olds attending Youthreach reported that they had been expelled, the schools in question would probably prefer to use the word 'suspended'. However, as McCormack pointed out, while schools may insist that expulsion is a rarity, what matters is that a significant minority of early school leavers believe that they have been expelled.

Further issues relating to suspension and expulsion are discussed in the section *School Characteristics*.

The Decision to Leave School

From the perspective of the early school leavers, school-related factors were considered to be the major reason for dropout. Over three-quarters mentioned at least one school-related factor when asked why they had left, the main factors being a loss of interest in study, being expelled, and not being able to keep up with studies. Similar results have been found in previous Irish (Boldt, 1994) and American research (Chow, 1996; Romanik & Blazer, 1990). Somewhat surprisingly, given that other Irish studies have found employment to be one of the primary reasons given for leaving school (Doran & Quilty, 1998; Morgan, Hickey, & Kellaghan, 1997), less than one quarter said they had left because they wanted money or a job.

Teachers believed that approximately one third had left school because of lack of interest or boredom; one in five were thought to have left because they had been suspended so often or had missed so many days; while 17.46% were thought to have left because they had gotten or wanted to get a job. The other main reasons given were lack of family interest in education, difficulties with school discipline, emotional problems and the availability of Youthreach. While both teachers and early school leavers cited a lack or loss of interest in school as the most common reason for leaving, teachers were more likely to cite family or personal characteristics of the early school leaver as a reason for dropout.

It should be noted that while early school leavers gave a number of common reasons for dropout, there was also considerable variability in the reasons given. In total, 18 different reasons were given, 10 of which were given by less than 5% of the sample. This highlights the fact that early school leavers are not a homogenous group

and the importance of recognising what Boldt (1997) has called “the diversity and complexity of the experiences and perspectives of early school leavers” (p.60).

School Characteristics

Analysis of the relationship between school factors and early school leaving is hampered by three factors. Firstly, many principals (30.77% of post-primary and 20% of primary schools) did not return the questionnaire on the characteristics of their school and its local community. Secondly, the quality of data returned (particularly for post-primary schools) was poor. While Likert scale 'opinion items' were generally completed, the completion rate for some of the fact-based items (such as dropout rates) was poor. Finally, the accuracy of some of the fact-based responses is dubious. For example, the reported average dropout rate per year in post-primary schools was 2.27% across Junior Cycle, with four schools not supplying details on numbers of dropouts. In contrast, the tracking process (although not directly comparable) found a dropout rate of at least 13.49%. While it is possible that principals' reports represent the actual percentage of early school leaving, it is more likely that the information supplied is inaccurate or incomplete.

The poor data available means it is not possible to state definitively that the post-primary schools that returned questionnaires have high dropout rates. Furthermore, in the absence of suitable comparison data for many variables, it is not always possible to ascertain how typical or atypical either the primary or post-primary schools sampled were. However, where possible, the data returned by schools are compared to national data.

Structural Characteristics of Schools

Based on principals' reports, dropout rate did not vary significantly by school type. This is in contrast to Smyth's (1999) finding that those attending vocational schools were more likely to drop out than were those attending other types of post-primary schools. However, data on dropout in our study were available for only a small number of schools (23). Average enrolment in post-primary schools in our sample was over 600 (ranging from 242 to 1,641). Although principals in larger schools reported greater numbers of dropouts, the number of dropouts as a percentage of the total school or total Junior Cycle enrolment did not vary significantly by school size, a finding that has been noted elsewhere (Smyth, 1999).

School Climate

Approximately 20% of early school leavers cited school factors as their reason for leaving. For example, they said they left because they did not like one or more teachers or the specific school in which they were enrolled, or because there were not enough practical subjects. Although teachers believed that 40% of school leavers dropped out due to lack of interest, and nearly 50% of the school leavers gave the same reason, these seemingly similar responses can be interpreted differently. While teachers may believe that the loss of interest stems from individual rather than school characteristics, the early school leavers may believe the opposite. Certainly, the fact that the overwhelming majority of early leavers enjoyed primary school, but only 50% enjoyed post-primary school, suggests that the early leavers found school interesting for at least some of the time. Therefore, it could be argued that features of the post-primary schools in which they were enrolled, rather than lack of interest in education per se, led to the disengagement from the education system.

Attendance Rates

Primary school principals who returned questionnaires reported an average attendance of 88.56%, with little variation by location. National comparisons are difficult, as the Department of Education and Science has not collected national-level attendance data since 1983/84. However, the School Attendance/Truancy Report (1994), which sampled a number of urban and rural primary schools, found an attendance rate of 93.31%. Based on this comparison, absenteeism was above average in the primary schools in our sample.

Daily attendance in the post-primary schools sampled (84.86%) was slightly lower than in primary school. Smyth (1999) found that schools with high absenteeism had higher dropout rates at Junior Cycle level. However, as national data are not available for post-primary school attendance, it is not possible to ascertain how typical our post-primary attendance data are.

Curriculum

Half of the early school leavers thought that what they had learnt in school would not be useful in the workplace, echoing Natriello's (1994) view that schooling may be perceived as less relevant when students do not make a connection between academic work and future economic prospects.

All of the schools surveyed offered the standard Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes. Only 50% offered the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme and 63% the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. Obviously, the early school leavers did not stay long enough in school to avail of these programmes. The Junior Certificate Schools Programme was on offer in less than 20% of schools. As this is the only example of curricular diversity at Junior Cycle level, it might prove beneficial if it were extended to more schools in an effort to entice more potential school leavers to stay in school.

While all of the post-primary schools had a career guidance service, classes were offered in first and second year in only 20% of schools, and in less than half in third year. Thus, approximately half of the early school leavers could not avail of career guidance classes, even if they had completed three years of post-primary schooling. While career guidance classes may not have prevented dropout, they may have given the early school leavers a better understanding of the link between school qualifications and future economic prospects.

School Expectations

Primary school principals believed that 70% of pupils in their school would continue beyond Junior Certificate, and that one third would go on to third level education. Expectations varied according to location, though not to a statistically significant degree. For example, while rural principals believed that half of their pupils would attend third level, less than one-third of provincial principals and only 5% of urban principals believed this.

The majority of post-primary school principals believed that over 80% of their students would continue beyond the Junior Certificate. However, less than half believed that the majority of students would go to third-level education. There were statistically significant location differences. While the majority of rural and provincial principals believed that the most of their students would attend third level, the majority of urban principals believed that less than 20% of their pupils would.

Class Assignment

Almost one quarter of early school leavers had been assigned to remedial classes upon entry to post-primary school. Of the remainder, 77.1% were assigned to ability groups and 21.1% to mixed ability classes. In contrast, Hannan, Smyth, McCullagh, O'Leary and McMahon (1996) found in 1993/94 that only 42.1% of post-primary schools

assigned pupils to streamed or banded classes upon entry, while 50% used mixed ability assignment¹. The difference between general practice in Irish post-primary schools and practice in schools in disadvantaged areas has been commented on elsewhere. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (1999) found that disadvantaged schools were twice as likely as non-disadvantaged schools to organise classes on the basis of performance on aptitude tests.

Unfortunately, due to the quality of our data, it was not possible to ascertain the ability group assignment for the majority of students. However, given that only 2.7% of those who sat an entrance exam were categorised as above average, it is highly likely that the majority of the sample who were not assigned to a remedial class would have been assigned to a lower ability group. If, as Hannan and Boyle (1987) found, streaming is associated with higher dropout rates for students in lower ability groups, it may be argued that the class assignment exacerbated the risk of early school leaving for many of the sample.

Suspensions and Expulsions

The reported level of suspensions varied greatly across schools. Three-quarters of primary schools had suspended no pupils during the 1998/99 school year, while seven had suspended some pupils. One of these schools (with by no means the largest enrolment) suspended 19 pupils, and had a total of 32 suspensions. In contrast, only three post-primary schools had *not* suspended a student in the past year. While half had suspended 13 pupils or less, one school had suspended 80 pupils, with a total of 136 suspensions. Again, the school in question was not a school with a particularly large enrolment. Indeed, there was no significant correlation between school size and either the number of suspensions or the number of pupils suspended.

Only one primary school principal and one post-primary principal reported expelling a pupil in the previous year. However, although not directly comparable, this appears to be somewhat at odds with the level of expulsions experienced by the sample of early school leavers. As noted earlier, self-reports from early school leavers indicated that 20% had been expelled. However, teachers indicated that none of those who reported that they had been expelled were actually expelled. Both the Joint Committee on Education and Science (1999) and the National Youth Federation

¹ Hannan et al. classified schools by the dominant system used. Thus, schools that had mixed ability classes but also had a remedial class were classified as using mixed ability assignment.

(1998) expressed concern at the lack of Departmental guidelines as to how suspensions and expulsions should be managed by schools. The NYF also commented on the unacceptability of schools retaining capitation grants for pupils they had temporarily or permanently removed from the school. It is clear that not only is there considerable variation between schools in the use of suspensions and expulsions, but also that a uniform approach is lacking.

Environmental Characteristics

This section will examine relationships between local community and peers and early school leaving.

Community Factors

The communities from which the sample was drawn had above average rates of early school leaving, with many parents unemployed or in lower socioeconomic groups. Urban areas tended to have more concentrated levels of disadvantage and social disorganisation. For example, over 80% of urban principals, but only a small minority of rural principals, reported that crime in the school's local community was above the national average. Similarly, more urban than provincial or rural post-primary principals described their local communities as characterised by high unemployment and single parenthood.

As well as differences between urban and other principals, there were differences between primary and post-primary school principals. Primary school principals tended to rate their school's local community as more disadvantaged on most measures. For example, while less than 40% of primary principals believed the community attached sufficient importance to education, almost 65% of post-primary principals believed this to be true. Just over half of the primary school principals thought the local area was poorly served by shops, compared to approximately 15% of their post-primary counterparts. A minority of primary principals believed that their school's local area was well served by accessible social services, compared to approximately 82% of post-primary principals.

The areas that were described as being most disadvantaged had higher dropout rates. For example, 15.88% of the urban pupils that were tracked were identified as early school leavers, compared to 7.08% of rural pupils. However, it was not only urban areas that were rated as disadvantaged. In keeping with the greater levels of

disadvantage reported by primary school principals, post-primary principals reported a lower dropout rate among their enrolment than did primary principals. This may partly be attributed to the fact that post-primary schools generally serve a broader area, and a more diverse population than primary schools. As such, disadvantage (particularly in urban areas) may be more concentrated in primary schools, resulting in a higher level of eventual dropout among their enrolment than is the case in post-primary schools.

Overall, findings of the present study appear to offer tentative support for previous research (e.g. Corcoran et al., cited in Crane, 1991; Garner & Raudenbush, 1991), which suggest that living in a disadvantaged area is associated with an increased risk of early school leaving.

Peer Influence

Although only two early school leavers indicated that they dropped out because their friends were leaving school, this may underestimate the influence of peers. For example, 26.42% of early school leavers reported that most of their friends left school before sitting the Junior Certificate, compared to 7.69% of the comparison group. This is similar to findings of other research (e.g. Rumberger, 1995; Finn, 1989) which indicate that dropouts are more likely to have friends who also drop out.

One third (34.2%) of male early school leavers, but only 6.7% of females, reported that most of their friends dropped out. This supports the findings of Jordan et al. (1996) who reported that males were more likely to give friends dropping out as their reason for leaving school. In contrast, more females (73.3%) than males (48.6%) reported that at least one sibling had dropped out of school before the Junior Certificate. Thus, it would appear that while male early school leavers are more like their peers, female early school leavers are more like their siblings.

Post-School Experiences

All of the early school leavers interviewed had dropped out of school at least a year before they were interviewed, while some had dropped out up to four years earlier. Thus, it is possible to consider only the immediate post-school experiences of early leavers.

Employment History

Over half of the early school leavers were in employment or doing an apprenticeship at the time of interview, and all but one had worked in at least one job since leaving school. The majority in employment were working full-time and half said they hoped to stay in their job for the foreseeable future. In contrast to previous research (McCoy et al., 1999), there were no gender differences in employment rates among the early leavers. This may be partly attributable to the fact that motherhood was far less common among the females interviewed in this study than in other research.

The rate of employment among the present sample is higher than that reported in previous studies of early school leavers (e.g., Boldt, 1997; Doran & Quilty, 1998; McCoy et al., 1999). Two factors may explain this. Firstly, the interviewees had spent an average of three years out of school at the time of interview, whereas most Irish research has tended to follow up school leavers a year after leaving. Secondly, the economic situation in 1999 was very different to that even in 1997 and 1998 (when McCoy et al. and Doran & Quilty carried out their research). Labour market shortages due to the current economic boom have meant that many who would previously have had difficulty finding employment are now employed. For example, while the unemployment rate for those aged 15 to 19 was 15% during the third quarter of 1998, by the fourth quarter of 1999² it had dropped to 9.4% (Central Statistics Office, 2000). While the rate of employment was higher than that found in previous Irish research, young Irish early school leavers still have a significantly lower employment rate than their counterparts with qualifications.

Most of the work which early school leavers had done since leaving school was unskilled, with labouring and factory work being the most common, followed by attendance at a FÁS course or similar type of training. It has been highlighted elsewhere (National Economic and Social Forum, 1997) that the employment opportunities available to unqualified young people are in the low skilled and low paid employment sectors, which are most at risk to changes in the labour market and the economy. Early leavers in our study had worked for an average of 21.04 months since leaving school, and the average time spent in one job was 10.06 months. However, there was considerable variation in employment histories, with a small number showing a pattern of very brief spells in employment.

² Most interviews with early school leavers were conducted during the third or fourth quarter of 1999.

The most common reasons given by early school leavers for changing or leaving a job were not liking the job or the boss, the end of a contract, or being offered another job. However, 14.81% stated that they had been sacked. When those currently employed or in an apprenticeship were asked how long they thought they would stay in their present job, half said they hoped to do so for the foreseeable future, while just over a third said their present job was only short-term. These findings suggest that, while the type of work available to the early school leavers was in the low skilled and low paid employment sectors, there was a moderate degree of job stability.

Prior to leaving school, only four early school leavers interviewed had worked during the school year. In contrast, the vast majority of the comparison group had a job at the time of interview, which took place during school term. However, given that the majority of early leavers left school between the ages of 13 and 15, whereas the average age of those in comparison group when interviewed was 17.25 years of age, the school employment histories are not comparable.

Training

One quarter of early school leavers had attended a FÁS course or some other type of training. In comparison, 77% of the early school leavers interviewed by Boldt (1997) had been involved at some time in training with a formal organisation. However, this disparity may be due to Boldt's sample being derived from post-primary school and FÁS lists, whereas the sample in this study was tracked from primary school. Furthermore, most of Boldt's early school leavers had in fact completed the Junior Certificate. Some of the present sample had minimal or no contact with post-primary schools, and would not have been included on lists of students passed on to FÁS, nor indeed would most of the rural early school leavers have had access to FÁS courses in their local area.

Interviewees recognised the importance of qualifications for future job prospects. However, most did not see the formal education system as the likely source of qualifications. Although approximately 80% said that they would be willing to do courses to help them get a job or a better job, only 22.73% of these would consider returning to school, while the majority wanted to avail of more practical training, such as Youthreach, apprenticeships or computer courses. This may be because most did not see school as offering skills that would prove useful in the workplace. Only 40.74% of early school leavers believed that what they had learnt in school would be useful in the workplace.

There is a clear disparity between the percentage of early school leavers that had availed of training courses and the percentage willing to avail of such courses. Greater availability of such courses might encourage more early school leavers to take up training opportunities. However, simple access to FÁS courses did not directly relate to uptake. Just under half of the early school leavers in urban areas had availed of training courses, as had one fifth of early school leavers in rural areas, despite the latter having limited access to courses. In contrast, none of the early school leavers in the provincial areas had attended a training course, despite the presence of a nearby training centre. This may indicate that advertising of training and contact between schools and local FÁS offices are as important as accessibility issues.

Reaction to Leaving School

Just under half (45.28%) of the early school leavers said they were happy or not bothered about having left school; 43.40% regretted having left; and the remainder had mixed emotions. These figures differ slightly from the findings of previous research. Boldt (1997) reports that less than one fifth of the early school leavers he interviewed expressed any regret on their decision to leave and that in general they were content with their present circumstances. However, the majority had left school after completing the Junior Certificate, and would not be defined as early school leavers in our study. Those interviewed for our research had left school with no qualifications, and many realised that their dropout limited their employment opportunities.

When asked how they would feel if in the future they had children who wanted to drop out of school, three quarters of the early leavers said they would try to prevent it. This suggests that while they may not have valued their own education, they understood the value of education for others.

Identifying Potential Early School Leavers

The previous sections have described the main variables that distinguished early school leavers from their classmates who remained in school. However, as was noted in Chapter 1, not all of these variables can be included in a template for use in identifying potential early school leavers. For efficient use, only a limited number of variables should be included, and only those that are easily quantifiable by teachers should be selected. Thus, this section outlines the process by which a small number of variables were selected for inclusion in a tracking template.

Selection of Variables

We believe that teachers can not reasonably be expected to supply accurate information about family context, home processes, or community factors. Furthermore, the proposed template is planned for use (initially, at least) in primary schools, making variables related to post-primary school experience largely irrelevant. Therefore, such variables were not considered for inclusion in the template. Only variables relating to easily identifiable family characteristics and personal characteristics relating to pupils' experiences in primary school were considered appropriate for inclusion. As comparison data were available only for self-reports, these data were used instead of teacher ratings.

A series of logistic regression and chi-squared analyses was conducted on the family background and primary school factors to establish the combination of variables most effective in identifying early school leavers. Based on these analyses, nine indicators of early school leaving were selected: gender, family structure, number of siblings, father's employment status, mother's education, school absences, perceived ability, getting in trouble with teachers, and retention in a grade.

Analysis revealed that some of the indicators distinguished between early school leavers and the comparison group better than others. These were weighted in order to maximise differences between early school leavers and persisters. Scores on the nine indicators were summed to give an 'at risk' score for each pupil. Table 7.2 shows the indicators used, and the weight assigned to each.

Table 7.2. Description of variables (and weights) proposed for inclusion in the template.

Variable	Response	Weight
Gender	Male	1
Family structure	Not living with both parents	2
Number of siblings	Five or more siblings	2
Father's employment status	Father unemployed	1
Mother's education	Left before Junior or Group certificate	1
Absences	Absent a few times a week	1
Perceived ability	Below average	1
Getting in trouble with teachers	Weekly or daily basis	2
Retention at a grade	Retained at least once during primary school	1

In order to achieve a balance between maximising the percentage of early school leavers identified and minimising the percentage of persisters identified as potential early school leavers, a cutoff point of four was used. Thus, a pupil would be identified as a potential early school leaver if he/she scored 4 or above on the tracking system. Using this cutoff, 84.2% of male early school leavers and 87.4% of female early school leavers in the present sample were identified as 'at-risk', while 20.0% of the male comparison group and 20.0% of the female comparison group were also identified as 'at risk'.

Suggested Additions to the Template

Although the nine indicators selected permitted reasonably accurate identification of early school leavers and persisters, some modifications need to be considered. Specifically, it would be preferable if some account were taken of the disadvantaged nature of the school's environment, of the high rate of early school leaving among Travellers, and of possible cohort effects.

Disadvantaged Schools

Teachers' ratings (particularly at primary level) indicated that the schools attended by early school leavers and the communities in which they were located were quite disadvantaged. Previous research has also demonstrated a link between living in a disadvantaged area and an increased risk of early school leaving (e.g., Garner & Raudenbush, 1991). However, assessing the extent of disadvantage in a school or its neighbourhood was considered to be beyond the scope of the teachers providing the data for the template. As an alternative, a school's inclusion in the Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage or the Breaking the Cycle scheme might be used as a proxy variable.

As this is a school-level variable, it would not need to be completed each time a pupil record was added, and thus, would not add significantly to the administrative effort required to maintain the template. The inclusion of disadvantage as an indicator might require a change in the cutoff point, given that a significant proportion of the school-going population attends schools classified as disadvantaged. As all of the sample in the present research was drawn from schools either designated as disadvantaged or included in the Breaking the Cycle scheme, it was not possible to assess the effects of including such an indicator.

Travelling Community

None of those interviewed was a Traveller. However, there is evidence from previous research (Task Force on the Travelling Community, 1996) that early school leaving is very high among this population. Because of this, the template might also include 'member of the Travelling community' as an indicator. Given the small numbers of Travellers in the population, the inclusion of this variable would not affect the threshold of risk for the general population and so the cutoff point would not need to be changed.

Cohort Effects

The indicators proposed for inclusion in the template are generated from a sample who are likely to be 20-year olds by the time the template will be used in primary schools. As such, there may be some generational differences that need to be considered. One likely difference relates to mother's educational status. Due to the increase in average educational attainment over the last few decades, the percentage of pupils whose mothers have left formal education without completing a state examination is likely to be considerably lower among future primary school pupils than it was in the research sample. Thus, the level of maternal education that is associated with risk of dropout may need to be adjusted for use with the future primary school populations.

While educational attainment has increased, family size has decreased. The percentage of pupils with five or more siblings is likely to be lower among those currently in primary education than it was in the research sample. Thus, consideration should be given to using four or more siblings as an indicator for future cohorts.

Limitations of a Template

The main limitation of the template is its focus on the individual pupil (in terms of both family background and school experiences), and the neglect of family process factors and general school characteristics. While school experiences and family background are significant predictors of early school leaving, an instrument that relies solely on them is unlikely to achieve 100% accuracy. That aside, the template is likely to prove useful in identifying a large proportion of those at risk of early school leaving.

Variables selected for inclusion in the template reflect differences that are manifest during primary school. However, some of the differences between the early school leavers and persisters did not emerge until post-primary school. It may be that a small number of early school leavers can only be identified as at risk of dropout

when in post-primary school. Thus, a template designed for use in primary schools is unlikely to identify these pupils as potential early school leavers.

Early school leavers are not a homogenous group, a fact that is particularly relevant when identifying variables that predict dropout. Even among the small number of early school leavers in the present study, there was considerable diversity of experience and of reasons for leaving school. For example, there were differences between male and female early leavers, and between rural, provincial and urban early leavers. Thus, a template that treats early school leavers as a homogenous group in terms of variables that predict early school leaving may hide important differences between sub-groups of early leavers.

Perhaps the most important limitation of a template is that it is heavily dependent on the accuracy of data entered. The volume of data required has been minimised, and limited to that which is relatively easily quantifiable in order to maximise accuracy. However, the quality of data returned by teachers is a matter of concern, as many discrepancies were found between the teachers' and early school leavers' reports in the present study. The template, as proposed, is based on self-reports by early school leavers and appears to discriminate relatively well between early school leavers and persisters. If, however, data entered by teachers differs significantly from data obtained from early school leavers, then the effectiveness of a template which is based on such data may be doubtful.

Limitations of the Research

There are a number of important limitations to the present study. As discussed in Chapter 1, a longitudinal approach was not adopted due to time constraints. The method used, retrospective reporting, can be coloured by events that have occurred between dropout and interview. For example, some students may have had a particularly negative experience of post-primary school. As a result, primary school may appear, in retrospect, to have been trouble-free, even though it would not have been viewed as such at the time.

Because of the small numbers in the sample of early school leavers, no more than basic statistical analysis was possible. While there is nothing inherently wrong with reporting descriptive data, the nature of early school leaving is complex and requires complex statistical analysis. For example, early research on dropout

highlighted the fact that ethnic minorities and children from lone-parent families were over-represented among early school leavers. However, later research using more complex statistical analysis (for example, Alexander et al., 1997; Rumberger, 1995) found that when socioeconomic status was controlled, such differences were minimised or disappeared. Unfortunately, given the small sample size in the present investigation, it was not possible to use such techniques. Therefore, the results represent a simplified picture of an early school leaver.

None of those interviewed was a Traveller. This is a significant omission, given the high rates of early school leaving among members of the Travelling community (Task Force on the Travelling Community, 1996). Although some Travellers were included in the original sample of 3rd class pupils, neither primary nor post-primary schools were able to supply up-to-date contact information for the majority. Informal conversations with some primary school principals indicated that the majority of their Traveller pupils had not enrolled in post-primary school. Unfortunately, as none of the original sample was a 'settled' Traveller, all had changed address or moved from the area by the time an attempt was made to contact them (approximately six years later). Although considerable effort was directed at ensuring adequate representation, it may be that a retrospective design such as was used precludes the possibility of including a representative number of Travellers in a sample.

Furthermore, the sample came primarily from disadvantaged areas. Although the majority of early school leavers come from such areas, there remains a minority who do not. Their experiences were not explored in this study, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings.

Finally, the present study identified a wide range of characteristics associated with dropout, as well as a narrower set of key characteristics for use by educational professionals in identifying potential early school leavers. The purpose of the research was to simplify the process of identifying potential early school leavers, and to ensure that those who might otherwise have been overlooked were 'flagged'. It is not intended that professional judgement be supplanted. If a pupil does not score above cutoff, but is judged by school staff to be at risk for other reasons, then the pupil should be added to the list generated by the template. Similarly, if a pupil scores above the cutoff, but is considered not to be at risk, then removal from the list should be considered.

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