

Published by the National Educational Welfare Board

ISBN 0-9553409-4-2, ISBN 978-0-9553409-4-9

2007



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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Educational qualifications are a crucial determinant of later life-chances across Western societies (Burgess, Gardiner and Popper, 2001; Hobcraft, 2000), with a particularly marked relationship between education and adult outcomes in the Irish context (Hannan and Shortall, 1991). However, because of poor attendance, among other factors, not all students derive equal benefits from their schooling (Brown, 1983). Low attendance levels can reflect more general disaffection with school and can be associated with early school leaving, academic underperformance and more restricted opportunities in terms of further education, training and the labour market (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003). In Ireland, the issue of attendance has been the subject of policy attention in recent decades but was not addressed systematically until the Education Welfare Act (Government of Ireland, 2000), which now provides a statutory framework for addressing student absenteeism.

However, relatively little is known in the Irish context about the nature of poor attendance and the factors shaping patterns of non-attendance among different groups of students. Moreover, the definitional boundaries between 'non-attendance', 'poor attendance' and 'early school leaving' have not always been well demarcated, resulting in ambiguity in research. Ideally, to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of issues surrounding school attendance in Irish schools, a primary research project would be required, which would collect data specifically for the purpose of looking at attendance issues. Such research would allow a comprehensive analysis of the complexity of issues surrounding attendance and non-attendance in a sample of Irish primary and post-primary schools. The research would examine a broad range of schools, collecting detailed student-level information on social background characteristics, experiences of schooling, attendance behaviour and a range of educational choices and attainments. In addition, the study would also seek detailed information on school level organisation and structure, ethos and climate and procedures and practices around behavioural and attendance issues. Conducting such a study longitudinally over a number of time points would allow an examination of the impact of a range of individual and school level factors and processes on school attendance and, crucially, different types of non-attendance.

This report, while providing interesting analysis of a range of issues around school attendance, is more exploratory in nature and is not intended to provide the

comprehensive analysis such a primary research project would yield. The report is based on re-analysis of data collected for earlier studies undertaken in the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and national data collected by the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB). These data, while not focusing explicitly on attendance, do provide valuable insights into the individual and school factors influencing attendance in post-primary schools. Given that the data was, for the most part, collected for other purposes, the measures and information collected on student (non-) attendance vary across the data sources, with the result that the discussion presented in this study draws on different terminology and different components of non-attendance are discussed. The following section presents a discussion of issues around the definition of attendance and non-attendance and discusses the measures of attendance available in these data sources.

Section 1.2 identifies the key objectives of the report and describes the methodology used and provides more detail on the databases used in the study. Finally Section 1.3 places the study in the context of national and international research on school attendance and its consequences. It also describes some initiatives developed to address poor school attendance in other national contexts.

1.1.2 Defining poor school attendance

It is generally agreed that poor school attendance is hard to define as this behaviour is caused by multiple, often interrelated, factors. However, it is argued in this study that, without a clear understanding of the nature of poor attendance, it is difficult to develop comprehensive approaches to address the problem.

The extent of absence from school can vary considerably. It can range from the occasional skipping of single lessons to absences that may last for several weeks (Atkinson, *et al.*, 2000). According to these authors if such prolonged absence is considered by the school to be 'unacceptable' and 'unjustified', it is referred to as 'truancy'. In Ireland, the Education Welfare Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) aims to promote and improve school attendance rates for children at primary and post-primary level education but fails to define absence from school. However, the Welfare Act established the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) - a body responsible for supervising and implementing the provisions of the Act in that 'each child attends a recognised school or otherwise receives a certain minimum education' (Section 10). The School Attendance/Truancy Report issued in 1994 by the Minister for Education goes further in that it considers an act of poor

attendance to involve 'casual or extended absence from school; is a specific form of non-attendance where unauthorised absence, for any period, results from premeditated action on the part of the pupil' (Government of Ireland, 1994, p.9).

In addition to the terms 'unauthorised absence' and 'truancy', Atkinson, *et al.*, (2000) also differentiate between an 'unauthorised' and 'authorised' or 'parentally condoned' absence. This form of absence may cover a variety of reasons, such as taking holidays or keeping a child from school to look after other family members, (see also Scottish Executive, 2002) and may not be acceptable in educational terms as serious enough reasons for missing school.

Schagen *et al.*, (2004) also feel that, as schools are relaxing their definition of 'unauthorised absence', the number of 'authorised' absences seems to be on the increase (*ibid*, p. 2). It is important to remember, however, that the definitions 'authorised' and 'unauthorised' are not without problems as they can vary from school to school (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2004; Schagen *et al.*, 2004) and country to country. In particular, the term 'unauthorised absence' often covers multiple forms of absence from school. Hence, greater clarity is needed on the interpretation of absence in order to address the issue in a constructive way. At present, the data collected does not differentiate sufficiently between different forms of absence from school.

Due to the nature of the study, it is not possible to identify ideal measures and definitions of attendance or poor/non-attendance and adopt such standardised measures and definitions consistently throughout the report. However, for the present report we are limited by the measures developed and adopted in these varying data sources and the fact that different data sources adopt different measures. Table 1.1 details the nature of data available in the datasets utilised in this report, giving information on the measures available on attendance, the sources of data, the student groups covered and the timing of the surveys.

Table 1.1: Measures of Attendance in Varying Data Sources

Dataset	Measures of Attendance	School or Teacher/Student Reports	Student Group	Year Collected
NEWB National Data	School Attendance Levels	School Returns	Primary and Post-Primary	2003/04
School Leavers' Survey	'Skipping' lessons, days	Student Reports	All levels of Post-Primary	2002
Schools' Database	Student Attendance 'good', 'moderate', 'poor'	Teacher Reports	Junior Certificate	1994
Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study	Student absenteeism, skipping class, being late for school & suspension	Student Reports	First Year Post-Primary	2002/03
Part-Time Work Study	Perceptions of impact of work on attendance at school	Student Reports	Junior and Leaving Certificate	2001/02

Clearly the datasets vary widely in the nature of the data available and definitions and sources of information around attendance. For example, while one data source is based on school reported overall attendance levels over the course of an academic year, another is based on teacher reports of individual students' overall attendance records. A further data source captures school-leavers' self-reported engagement in non-attendance behaviour ('skipping lessons') during their last year at school, while another source considers student reports of a range of attendance-related behaviours including absenteeism, skipping class, being late for school and suspension. Apart from the NEWB data (published as Weir, 2004), all of the data is based on post-primary students, although the studies span students in first year of post-primary, Junior Certificate students, Leaving Certificate students and those who have left post-primary.

Hence, the study is limited by the variability in measures and definitions of poor attendance and non-attendance available in the various data sources and the fact that there is currently no comprehensive data available on the levels, and types, of student attendance and non-attendance in Irish primary and post-primary schools, as well as the factors contributing to such different patterns of attendance behaviour. The data currently available do not allow a comprehensive analysis of the extent and nature of (non-) attendance behaviour in Irish primary and post-primary schools. For the most part, the data do not differentiate between different forms of non-attendance (illness, holidays, skipping school etc.). However, the varying sources of information are complementary and offer insights into a range of different perspectives on attendance issues.

1.2 Objectives and Methodology

1.2.1 Objectives

The National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) commissioned this study. It is an exploratory study examining issues around attendance in Irish primary, and particularly, post-primary schools. As noted earlier, it is based on secondary analysis of existing data gathered by the ESRI for previous educational studies. The aims of the study are to:

- Develop a profile of poor attenders in Irish post-primary schools, identifying the key gender, social background, regional characteristics of poor attenders;
- Examine the subjective and attitudinal characteristics of students with different patterns of attendance;
- Analyse the relationship between school organisation and climate and attendance patterns; and
- Examine the impact of attendance behaviour on early school leaving, examination performance and longer-term post-school outcomes.

1.2.2 Methodology

Since 2003/4, national data on attendance levels across the primary and post-primary sectors have been compiled on an annual basis. These data are based on attendance records submitted by primary and post-primary schools to the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) at the end of the academic year. All primary and post-primary schools in the country are asked to complete a form detailing basic information about attendance (including both 'authorised' and 'unauthorised' absences) for the year. In 2003/4, the response rate was 71 per

cent at post-primary level (527 out of 742 schools) and 83 per cent at primary level (2,601 out of 3,137 schools). This data has a number of advantages in allowing an examination of attendance levels and the prevalence of more serious non-attendance across schools differentiated by type, size, region and designated disadvantaged status. However, it does not provide information at the individual student level. In particular, the data does not allow us to identify the kinds of students who are regularly absent from school or whether some schools have better attendance records than others, taking account of their student intake¹.

In order to target policy interventions effectively, it is crucial to understand the processes underlying student non-attendance. In the absence of systematic national data linking student behaviour with school context, there are a number of databases collected for other purposes which can provide useful insights into the individual and school factors shaping non-attendance. This study draws on the following databases, all of which are part of earlier studies undertaken at the ESRI:

School Leavers' Survey

The School Leavers' Survey is carried out for the Department of Education and Science on a regular basis and employs a national stratified sample of school-leavers who are interviewed approximately one year after leaving school. The survey gathers a wealth of information about young people's social background, their educational attainment and performance, their post-school pathways and their early labour market experiences. In addition, from 2002 onwards, valuable information was collected on whether young people had 'skipped' lessons or days from school, as well as their attitudes towards and experiences of, school. These data allow an examination of the relationship between poor attendance while at school and students' objective characteristics, their levels of engagement in school, their subjective experiences of school, their performance in examinations and their post-school educational and labour market experiences. The analyses presented in this report draws on findings from the School Leavers' Survey of 2002 (published as *2002 Annual School Leavers' Survey*, Gorby, McCoy and Williams, 2003). Thus, the reference cohort in the selected year refers to those who left the official post-primary system in the 2000/01 academic year (i.e. between September 2000 and the end of August 2001).

¹ There have been limited attempts to explore variation across schools and school types (see Weir, 2004 and O'Briain, 2006).

School' Database, 1994

This is a detailed database collected as part of a study for the Department of Education and Science in 1994 (*Coeducation and Gender Equality: Exam Performance, Stress and Personal Development*, Hannan *et al.*, 1996). The study included almost 6,000 Junior Certificate students and 4,000 Leaving Certificate students within 116 post-primary schools. Analyses in this report relate to the Junior Certificate cohort and explore the factors associated with varying attendance rates at Junior Cycle level. Students were interviewed in January/February of their examination year and were subsequently followed up to determine if they had taken the Leaving Certificate examination. Because of school closure/amalgamation and student transfer to other schools between the two time-points, data relate to 5,468 students within 108 post-primary schools. The survey collected detailed information on the social background of students, their attitudes to school, the nature of their interaction with their teachers and peers along with their educational and occupational aspirations. At the time of the survey of students, information was also collected from teachers on the attendance records of students over the school year. Students were classified by teachers as having 'good' (>90 per cent), 'moderate' (80-90 per cent) or 'poor' (<80 per cent) attendance records.

Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study

This database contains information on the experiences of students in twelve case-study schools (selected to capture schools of varying type, size and location, as well as different practices concerning the integration of first year students, the approach to subject choice and the approach to ability grouping) during their first year in post-primary schooling. The data was collected as part of a study (*Moving Up: The Experiences of First-Year Students in Post-Primary Education*, Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004) for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The database contains detailed information on students' attitudes to school, teaching and learning, and specific subject areas along with their aspirations for the future. Importantly, the data incorporates student reports of a range of attendance-related behaviours including absenteeism, skipping class, being late for school and suspension.

Part-Time Work Among Post-Primary Students (At Work in School)

To examine the impact of part-time work on student engagement in school life and attendance at school, the report also draws on a recent study, for the Department of Education and Science, of post-primary students' participation in part-time work (*At Work in School: Part-Time Employment Among Second Level Students*, McCoy and Smyth, 2005). As well as considering Irish and international

studies on the relationship between part-time work and school life/activities, the report draws on a survey of Junior and Leaving Certificate students in six schools. Within these schools, over 1,000 Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students completed questionnaires in November/December 2001 regarding their experiences of, and attitudes to, part-time work. The data allow us to explore students' own views on balancing study and paid work and to look at the perceived impact of their paid work on school attendance and engagement in school life more generally.

Some limitations are evident in data availability in the Irish context. First, other than NEWB data, information relates to post-primary schools with a neglect of attendance issues in the primary sector. If, as indicated by some international studies, attendance difficulties commence relatively early, more detailed information is needed on the issues influencing absenteeism at the primary level. Second, as noted earlier, different data sources adopt different measures of non-attendance. The School Leavers' Survey, for example, uses a self-reported measure of 'skipping' lessons or days while at school while the Schools' Database uses teacher reports of attendance. Because of the different methods used in different studies, it is often difficult to compare and contrast across the research findings. In particular, it is difficult to determine whether levels of attendance have changed greatly over a significant time period. In acknowledging these limitations, it is important to note that this report is the first comprehensive synthesis of data on attendance-related issues in the Irish context. The re-analysis of existing databases enables us to answer a number of questions relating to the factors shaping attendance patterns as well as raising other questions which could usefully be pursued in future research.

1.3 Previous Research on Poor Attendance

This section outlines the existing research in relation to: the impact of poor attendance on students' life chances; types of poor attendance; possible causes of poor attendance and measures taken to address attendance-related issues in different national contexts.

1.3.1 Impact of Early School Leaving² and Poor School Attendance on Students' Life-Chances

Regular school attendance is essential to the learning process in general and academic achievement in particular. Overall, levels of educational attainment have

² For the purposes of this study, 'early school leaving' is taken to refer to students leaving school before completing the Leaving Certificate examination or its equivalent.

risen in developed countries over recent years with the majority of students now staying on at school until the end of upper secondary education (OECD, 2003). However, a significant minority of students leave school prior to completion of post primary schooling, thus jeopardising their future life-chances in terms of entry to the labour market (Gorby *et al.*, 2005, Malone and McCoy, 2003). Furthermore, there is strong research evidence that early school leaving and poor educational attainment is strongly linked with long-term unemployment (McCoy and Smyth, 2004). There is now a corpus of international research literature on poor school attendance and its impact on student outcomes (Rothman, 2004, Dalziel and Henthorne, 2005b, Morris and Rutt, 2004). Invariably, persistent absence from school results in a waste of resources for society (Denny, 2004) and limited life-chances and quality of life for the young person involved (Farrington 1980, Wagner *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, early school leaving and persistent absenteeism can also lead to antisocial behaviour and the beginning of a criminal career (Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), 2004, Robins and Radcliffe, 1980).

What is the extent of school absenteeism? In the Republic of Ireland the annual percentage attendance at post-primary level is 91.3% and at primary level 94.1% (Weir, 2004). In other words, the majority of students at both levels have good standards of school attendance. However, the proportion of students in post-primary schools absent 20 days or more is as high as 18.9%; the corresponding figure at primary level is 10.7% (Weir, 2004). The study also notes that schools catering for greater proportions of 'disadvantaged' students have lower annual percentage attendance rates. Overall, the figures show that poor attendance is a serious problem with a considerable minority of students at primary and post-primary absent from school for 20 days or more during the course of the 2003/04 academic year. It is difficult to place Ireland in an international context in terms of the prevalence of attendance problems and levels of attendance and non-attendance as countries collect information on different measures of attendance and different criteria are employed to assess attendance levels.

1.3.2 Possible Causes of Poor Attendance

Poor school attendance is often seen to be linked to socio-economic disadvantage (influenced by factors such as poverty, coming from a single-parent family, local authority housing etc.) (Government of Ireland, 1994, Kinder *et al.*, 1996) as well as school factors, or a combination of these. Consequently, students who miss school without any valid reason do not constitute a homogenous group and a variety of strategies are needed to tackle the issue (NIAO, 2004, p.32). In many cases the causes are also contested between parents/students and the school

staff (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003). Existing international research evidence allows us some insight into the causes of persistent absenteeism, which are divided into the following broad categories:

❖ **(a) Background/ Personality-related Causes**

A number of factors that have an impact on absenteeism are linked to the background of the student. Studies carried out in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland show that often these can be related to the family - either parental attitudes or family 'problems' (Kinder *et al.*, 1996, Brown, 1983). Furthermore, Webb and Vulliamy (2004) report that among the poor attenders participating in their study approximately three quarters did not live with their two parents. Overall, students are seen particularly at risk of poor attendance if they come from poorer and low skilled backgrounds, live in local authority housing in inner-city areas (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). Exploring teachers' perceptions, Malcolm *et al.* (2003) found that teachers identified the following factors as contributing to absence from school: low parental value on education; children as carers; domestic violence; long and atypical working hours of parents; and the lack of a school uniform or equipment.

In addition, some researchers have identified gender differences among students who miss school without any valid reason. The Social Exclusion Unit (1998) in the United Kingdom and Wagner *et al.*, (2000, p.23) in Germany found that boys³ are more likely than girls to become poor attenders. International research has also identified age⁴ differences in that students with poor attendance tend to be older students (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998).

Over and above the factors detailed above, non-attendance can also be attributed to high levels of part-time work (Wagner *et al.*, 2000, McCoy and Smyth, 2004); 'underlying problems with a psychiatric or emotional disturbance base' (Government of Ireland, 1994, p.14); psychological and behavioural problems, and low self-esteem (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003). It is important that such students be assessed as early as possible in order to address their specific needs as well as maintaining a positive learning environment for other students.

❖ **(b) Education/School-related Causes**

In addition to background-related factors, persistent non-attendance may also be linked to education-related causes. At school level, suitability of the curriculum

³ For boys, living in a single parent family appears to be a risk factor (Youth Cohort Study, UK).

⁴ Wagner *et al.* (2000) in Germany report an almost continuous increase in poor attendance between the age of 13 and 17 years.

and its delivery is seen to have an impact on disaffection and attendance (Kinder, *et al.*, 1996, Brown, 1983). An OFSTED study in the United Kingdom found that in some schools poor attendance is centred among pupils who are weak readers⁵, indicating a clear link between academic difficulties and absence. Difficulty in 'keeping up' with school work and learning difficulties experienced by students are also highlighted in other studies as possible causes of absence (see Government of Ireland, 1994; Malcolm *et al.*, 2003; National Youth Policy Programme, 1994).

Second, poor school attendance is sometimes also linked to teacher-student relationships, especially if such relationships are not respectful or fair (Kinder *et al.*, 1996). In the same vein, a study in the Irish context identified an impact of positive and negative interaction with teachers on students' perceptions of school and on attendance (Smyth, *et al.*, 2004, Smyth, 1999). Friends and peers are also sometimes seen to have an influence on school attendance. They may promote poor school attendance as a status-seeking activity or as a way of joining in. Furthermore, non-attendance can also be related to teasing or bullying at school (Kinder *et al.*, 1996).

In cases of serious misconduct, schools may practice suspension and expulsion from school. There seems to be a general consensus that the numbers of students disciplined in such a way has risen over recent years (Government of Ireland, 1994). While removing disruptive students may be seen as beneficial for improved classroom climate, excluding disruptive and difficult students schools can significantly contribute to non-attendance (Government of Ireland, 1994). Other research has identified other key factors in absenteeism (Smyth, 1999), including academic ethos and expectational climate in the school. Absenteeism levels are significantly lower where teachers have high expectations for students, an effect which operates over and above the student's own expectations (*ibid*, p.91).

1.3.3 Attempts to Address Poor Attendance

Internationally, there are various initiatives and targeted interventions addressing non-attendance. These vary from in-school programmes and partnerships with other organisations to interventions introduced by Government departments. This section explores some of the attempts made in other countries to address the issue.

⁵ OFSTED (1995), *Access, achievement and attendance in secondary schools*.

Reviewing some of the existing initiatives it was evident that schools have a major role in promoting and monitoring school attendance. This is usually done by rewarding regular attendance, informing parents of unauthorised absences and systematically monitoring attendance. In terms of different monitoring devices, Withers (2004), in the Australian context, lists measures such as period report or register; daily report or register; weekly report or register; student-kept journals and computerised record-keeping used by the schools in their attempt to address the issue. Furthermore, NIAO (2004) in Northern Ireland recommends the use of morning as well as afternoon registration, to reduce the extent of skipping classes after the first registration. They also maintain that in order to gain a better understanding of the patterns associated with absenteeism it was recommended that the collection of attendance information was to take place on a lesson-by-lesson basis (ibid. p 23)⁶.

While constant and regular monitoring of absences (authorised and unauthorised) gives a school a good idea of the extent of the problem, additional measures are needed to combat the problem. For this purpose many schools employ special personnel who, in most cases, work closely with the school staff as well as outside agencies. Webb and Vulliamy (2004) in the United Kingdom highlight the important role of the *Home-School Support Worker*. In particular, the support workers were found to considerably reduce the numbers of fixed-term exclusions. Similarly, a report from Northern Ireland recommends that each school should have an *Education Welfare Officer* (EWO) working in partnership with the school authorities to promote regular attendance as well as the support from Education Welfare Services (NIAO, 2004, p.34). This was seen to help the school to establish when a student has developed a pattern of irregular attendance or when there is a lack of parental co-operation in terms of the regular attendance of their children (ibid, p. 34). One of the initiatives in the United States set up to target poor school attendance, *Fulton County Poor Attendance Intervention Project*, also utilises the (voluntary) help of trained legal professionals in assisting students who are chronically absent and their families. The assistance includes legal counsel as well as mentorship. The programme is being found to reduce juvenile delinquent behaviour (Railsback, 2004). In Ireland, many schools have home-school-community liaison officers, which may play an important role in the area of attendance, but there has been an absence of research on this issue.

⁶ While acknowledging benefits associated with this approach, the report does not refer to possible student outcomes.

In yet another approach to combating poor attendance, Webb and Vulliami (2004) suggest *alternative curricula* for students likely to become persistent absentees in the form of lessons outside school and work experience. This approach was seen to benefit those pupils who 'did not respond well to the traditional academic curriculum; who had experienced little academic success; or who would gain from a curricular approach offering greater vocational interest and relevance' (Department of Education and Skills, 2001, p.41). Similarly, an initiative '*Education other than at school*' (EOTAS) in Northern Ireland caters for a small number of pupils of all ages who are out of mainstream school for a variety of reasons (awaiting a placement in a Pupil Referral Unit, or a special school). These students are offered, through the Boards⁷, a broad-based educational programme which includes a basic skills curriculum - literacy, numeracy and ICT; Personal and Social Education - training in personal, social and life skills; and extended work experience. The latter is undertaken with local employers in the students' vocational area of interest (NIAO, 2004). There have been attempts to introduce more vocational alternatives for students in Irish post-primary schools, particularly through the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and, more notably, the Leaving Certificate Applied. It is also interesting to note that the latter Leaving Certificate Applied has a minimum attendance requirement to ensure successful certification. However, research looking at the extent to which such programmes have impacted on attendance levels, particularly for those most at risk of poor attendance and early school leaving, is lacking at present.

In some countries, programmes can also involve families in that they seek to increase parental responsibility. For example, *Fast Track to Prosecution for School Non-Attendance* in the United Kingdom engages the parent in the process of combating absence. Failing to address attendance-related problems will result in prosecution proceedings (Halsey *et al.*, 2004).

One of the more comprehensive approaches to address poor attendance, the *Poor Attendance Reduction Demonstration Program*, was introduced in 1999 in the United States, providing grants for initiatives dealing with poor attendance (Railsback, 2004). Such intervention programmes have to include certain key components involving schools, families, communities and outside agencies:


- ❖ Have consistent policies and practices, which keep children in school, rather than pushing them out.

⁷ In Northern Ireland there are 10 official bodies involved in the management and administration of the education system as well as a number of voluntary bodies. There are five Education and Library Boards who are responsible, among other things, for enforcing school attendance.

- ❖ Involve families in all programme planning and implementation. There must be mutual trust and communication for families and schools to work together to solve problems.
- ❖ Provide a continuum of supports to students, including meaningful incentives and consequences. Supports should include academic (e.g. tutoring, after-school programmes, creating smaller learning communities); behavioural (e.g. mentoring, group or individual counselling); family and health supports (e.g. drug and alcohol rehabilitation). Meaningful incentives should be long, not short term, and consequences should not be punitive, but serve to keep students in, not push them out (e.g. in-school suspensions rather than out-of-school suspensions).
- ❖ Collaboration with local law enforcement, community organisations, mentoring programmes and social services. This may be challenging at first because community groups often see attendance as a school responsibility. But collaboration is indeed beneficial to pool resources and to have more community input.
- ❖ Ensure building-level support and commitment to keeping children in the educational mainstream.
- ❖ Continuously evaluate programmes and obtain meaningful and relevant data to make informed changes (ibid, pp. 20-21).

There is a general consensus that poor school attendance has to be addressed early as highlighted by another initiative in Northern Ireland '*Primary Attendance Matters*' (PAM) - an intervention to target students who are at risk of developing a poor record of attendance in the early years (NIAO, 2004, p.45). *Kern County Poor Attendance Reduction Program* set up in the United States also focuses on early intervention and targets students in kindergarten all the way through to grade 10. This programme includes home visits; assessment; weekly school contacts; counselling (student and family); referrals to community resources; mentoring and evaluation. The goal is to stop persistent absenteeism within a couple of months. The programme has been successful in reducing the extent of unexcused absences (Railsback, 2004).

While many programmes and initiatives exist internationally to target poor school attendance, they have developed in specific national contexts and often lack rigorous evaluation in order to establish their effectiveness (Railsback, 2004). Hence it is difficult to suggest specific models of good practice for Ireland. However, this section has shown that a number of measures can be used to combat poor school attendance: using monitoring systems in schools; utilising the



support of specific personnel inside as well as outside the school; involving parents and community in the process and making teaching and learning more relevant to students at risk of developing a habit of poor school attendance. It should also be noted that there are currently a number of initiatives, funded predominantly by the Department of Education and Science, aimed at addressing educational disadvantage in Ireland. Indirectly many of these also deal with issues related to attendance. However, little is known about their impact on attendance, an issue which requires further research and attention.

Having given an overview of the methodology and issues that can be addressed in the study, the report will take the following format. Chapter 2 looks at the 'objective' characteristics of students with varying attendance levels, examining such factors as age; gender; social background and regional location. Chapter 3 turns attention to the more 'subjective' or attitudinal characteristics of students with varying attendance levels. Among the issues explored are students' experiences of school life, their attitudes towards school, their self-ratings and their interaction with teachers and peers. Chapter 4 switches focus to schools and looks at the extent of variation across schools in levels of attendance among students and explores some of the factors underlying any such variation. The impact of poor attendance is examined in Chapter 5, with the discussion focusing on the impact of attendance on early school leaving; examination performance; progression to post-school study and unemployment in the early labour market career. Finally, Chapter 6 summaries the key findings and discusses some directions for further research and policy.

Chapter 2: Profile of Students with Poor Attendance: Objective Characteristics

2.1 Introduction

School attendance is strongly related to students' educational outcomes (see Smyth, 1999). In particular, absence rates may have significant impact on their educational attainment (Morris and Rutt, 2004), early school leaving and future life-chances (Farrington, 1980, Wagner *et al.*, 2004) as discussed in Chapter 1. Research shows that poor attendance is often caused by a combination of factors, including school, family and community factors as well as student characteristics (Kinder, *et al.*, 1996). This chapter focuses on the objective characteristics of Irish post-primary students with poor attendance. It starts by discussing the extent of poor attendance utilising information derived from the Schools' Database 1994 (Junior Certificate students) and the School Leavers' Survey (SLS) of 2002.⁸ The chapter then moves on to explore gender and age differences among students with poor attendance. Section 2.5 presents background characteristics of students with poor attendance focusing on social class, parental education and ethnicity. Section 2.6 explores regional variation in the prevalence of poor attendance and Section 2.7 summarises the main points raised in the chapter.

2.2 The Level of Poor Attendance in Post-Primary Schools

The study explored the level of poor attendance in post-primary schools by utilising two sets of data. In the first study, Junior Certificate students within 116 schools were classified by teachers as having 'good' (>90 per cent), 'moderate' (80-90 per cent) or 'poor' (<80 per cent) attendance records (Schools' Database, 1994). Among the sample of students, over three-quarters (79 per cent) were classified as having good attendance levels, 15 per cent as having moderate attendance with 6 per cent seen as having poor attendance levels (Schools' Database 1994).

In another study, young people who left school in 2000/1 were asked about the extent to which they 'skipped lessons' (School Leavers' Survey 2002, published as Gorby *et al.*, 2003). The analysis identified two broad groups of students -

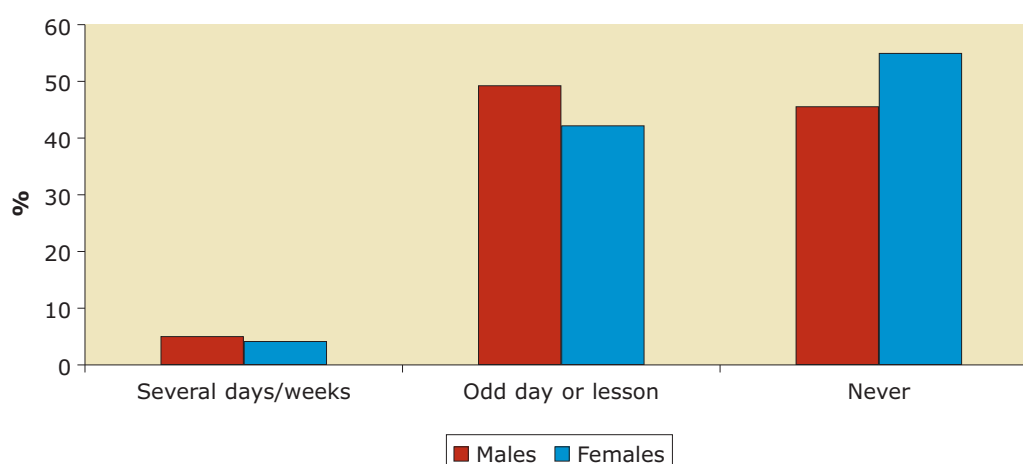
⁸ The earlier data relate to overall levels of attendance while the School Leavers' Survey (SLS) data focuses specifically on (self-reported) 'skipping school'. Any differences in the findings of the two studies must, therefore, be seen in this context.

some young people reported 'skipping school'⁹ several days or weeks at a time, while others 'skipped' the occasional lesson or day. Overall, half of the school-leavers had never 'skipped' lessons; almost a quarter had missed a lesson here and there, over a fifth had missed a day here and there while 5 per cent had missed several days or weeks at a time. In line with other studies (see Morris and Rutt, 2004) the analysis shows that while the majority of students have good attendance records; attendance is a problem with a small minority of post-primary students. The following sections explore differences among students with different levels of attendance.

2.3 Gender Differences Among Students with Poor Attendance

Some researchers have identified gender differences among students with poor attendance (see the Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). Wagner *et al.*, (2000) found that boys were more likely than girls to be absent from school. In the same vein, previous study in the Irish context showed that girls have somewhat lower absenteeism rate (see Smyth, 1999) compared to boys. Similar results were produced by this study - young men were somewhat more likely to 'skip lessons' than young women (see Figure 2.1). Of males 45 per cent reported never 'mitching' during their last year at school, compared to over 55 per cent of females. This gender difference is evident within all levels of school-leavers, from those without qualifications to those sitting the Leaving Certificate.

Figure 2.1: Frequency of Poor Attendance in Last Year of School



⁹ As discussed in Chapter 1, the data sources adopt different questions and measures around student attendance and absenteeism. For the most part, we utilise the measures incorporated in the original surveys - in the case of the School Leavers' Survey data, for example, we are examining the extent to which students 'skipped' lessons or days/weeks from school.

2.4 Age

In line with international studies (see Social Exclusion Unit, 1998 and Wagner *et al.*, 2000) and previous studies in the Irish context (Smyth, 1999) age was found to be significantly associated with attendance levels. Examination of Junior Certificate students showed that 28 per cent of those aged 16 years or more had only moderate or poor attendance¹⁰ compared with 16 per cent of those aged 14 years. This may reflect greater disengagement among students who had been kept back a year or more earlier in their schooling career.

Exploring data from the School Leavers' Survey 2002 it was evident that there were no significant age differences in the likelihood of skipping class when age was controlled for.¹¹ Further analysis showed that the highest reported incidence of serious absenteeism was among those students who left school during/after third year. Such findings suggest high levels of disaffection among those engaging in serious absenteeism, with many such students leaving school early in post-primary. It appears such disaffection and negative behaviour manifests itself shortly after their transition into post-primary education, if not earlier, pointing to the need for policy intervention at an early stage of post-primary, if not within primary education.

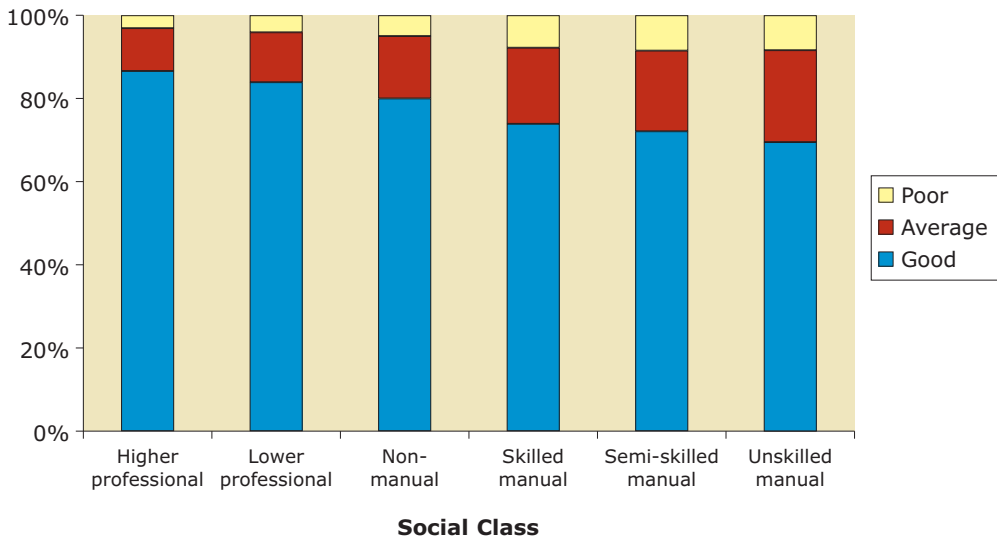
2.5 Background Characteristics

International studies show that family background is strongly associated with students' educational outcomes (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). In Ireland, social class inequalities in educational participation and achievement levels have remained persistent over time, having a strong impact on the future life chances of young people (McCoy and Smyth, 2003). Elsewhere, Kinder *et al.*, (1996) and Brown (1983) also highlight the impact of social class background on school absenteeism. The authors note that attendance is poorer among lower social classes. Discussing the impact of social class background on absenteeism levels in Ireland, Smyth (1999) found that students from higher professional backgrounds were less likely to be poor attenders compared to those from unskilled manual backgrounds. In the same vein, this study found that aspects of family background were significantly associated with the attendance of Junior Certificate students. In general, students from professional backgrounds were much less likely to be absent from school than those from working-class backgrounds; 30 per cent of those from unskilled manual backgrounds had moderate/poor attendance compared with only 13 per cent of those from higher professional backgrounds (see Figure 2.2). A similar pattern was found when parental education was examined. Of students whose mothers left school at the

¹⁰ See Chapter 1 for the definition of 'poor attendance'.

¹¹ It should be noted that the nature of the School Leavers' Survey data mean that it is difficult to disentangle age from stage of leaving school. We do not, therefore, know whether those who are younger than average within their year group are at an increased risk of poor attendance.

Figure 2.2: Attendance Levels by Social Class Background, 1994

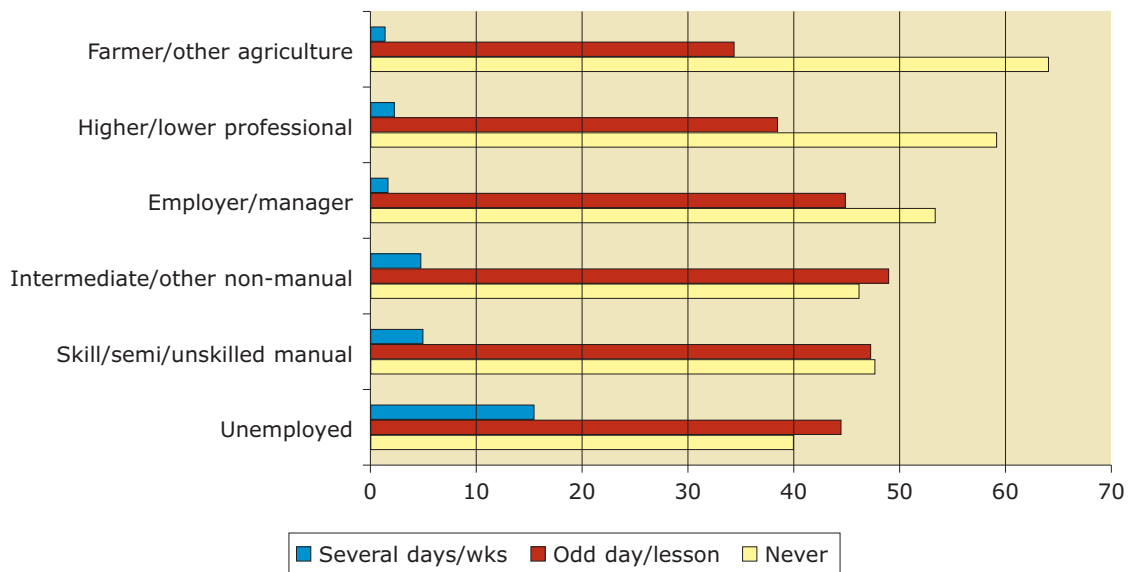


Source: Schools' Database 1994.

primary level 70 per cent had good attendance records compared with 88 per cent whose mothers have a third-level degree.

Similarly, looking at School Leavers' Survey data, clear differences in absence rates by socio-economic background are evident. While just 2 per cent (or less) of those from professional, managerial or farming/agricultural backgrounds report serious absenteeism in their final year at school, almost 16 per cent of their counterparts with unemployed fathers report such habitual poor attendance behaviour (Figure 2.3). More ad hoc absenteeism, missing the occasional lesson,

Figure 2.3: Frequency of Poor Attendance by Father's Socio-economic Group



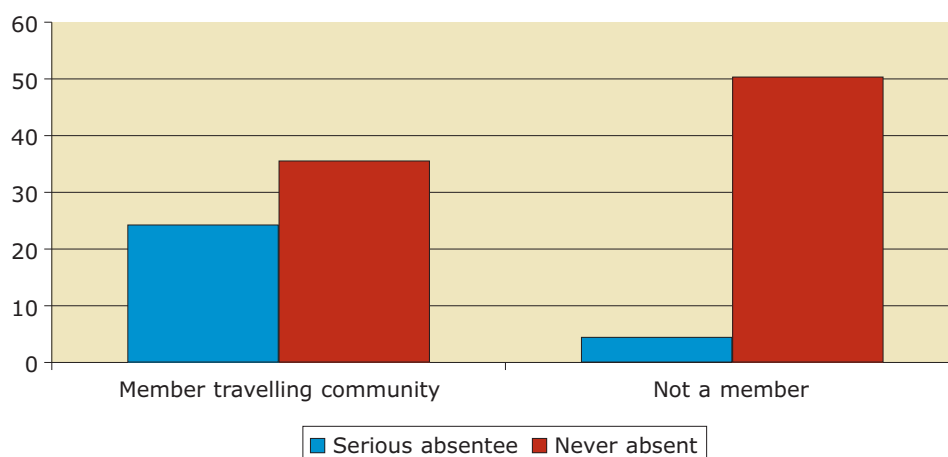
Source: Schools Leavers' Survey, 2002.

is most prevalent among intermediate non-manual and manual groups. Students from farming/agricultural or professional backgrounds are significantly more likely to report not being absent during their last year at school (reflecting at least in part their greater retention in school and increased likelihood of reaching the Leaving Certificate stage). While 64 per cent of school-leavers with fathers employed in farming report no occurrence of poor attendance, the figure is just 40 per cent of those with unemployed fathers.

In addition to the positive correlation with social class background, levels of poor attendance are also associated with parental educational attainment: those engaging in persistent absenteeism are more likely to have parents who left school at primary level, while those who report no incidence of poor attendance during their last year at school are most likely to have parents who progressed to third-level education.

While no adequate data is available to explore levels of school attendance by students' ethnic origin, the analysis showed that poor attendance patterns show a particularly strong association with membership of the Traveller Community, as illustrated in Figure 2.4; a quarter of Traveller students engaged in persistent poor attendance compared with 5 per cent of other students.

Figure 2.4: Prevalence of Poor Attendance by Membership of Traveller Community



Source: Schools Leavers' Survey, 2002.

2.6 Regional Variation in Poor Attendance

The prevalence of poor attendance shows some variation across regional areas, as illustrated in Figure 2.5. The incidence of serious poor attendance in the Border, Dublin and South-Eastern areas is twice the rate of that reported among school-leavers in the Mid-East, Western and Midland regions.

Figure 2.5: Proportion Who Report Poor Attendance in Their Last Year at School



Source: Schools Leavers' Survey, 2002.

2.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has examined the objective characteristics associated with higher levels of absenteeism drawing on two sources of data. The findings indicate that young men are somewhat more likely to 'skip school' than young women as are students who are older than average. Both attendance and absenteeism levels are associated with family background characteristics; students from professional families and/or those whose parents have third-level qualifications tend to have better attendance records and are less likely to skip classes. While differences in attendance rates by national origin are not statistically significant, attendance patterns show a particularly strong association with membership of the Traveller Community. In addition, the study identifies some regional differences - the incidence of serious poor attendance is higher in the Border, Dublin and South-Eastern areas.

Chapter 3: Profile of Students with Poor Attendance: Subjective Characteristics

Previous and subsequent chapters look at the links between objective characteristics such as social background, gender, school factors and the occurrence of poor attendance. This chapter looks at the subjective characteristics of individual students and how this relates to their attendance levels. The chapter does not propose that the relationship between student attitudes and attendance levels is a causal relationship, but rather allows us to look at some of the attitudes that characterise students with poor attendance. The section particularly focuses on the student experience of school life, looking at their attitudes to school, teachers, their self-rating as students and their interactions with peers. In addition to these factors, the relationship between part-time working and poor attendance is also explored. This chapter draws on three data sources to investigate these issues, the Schools' Database of 1994, the School Leavers' Survey of 2002 and the Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study 2004.

3.1 Factors Influencing School Attendance

Drawing on all three data sources, this section looks at some of the factors related to school attendance. The data reveal some important findings regarding student attitudes to school, their teachers, their peers and how they see themselves academically. These subjective characteristics are found to be significantly associated with their attendance levels.

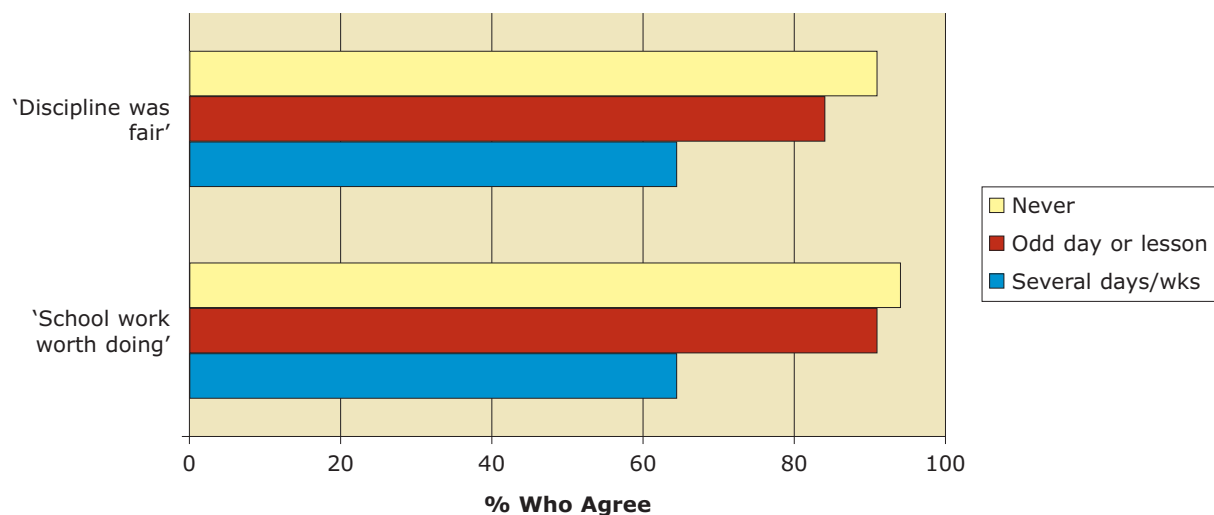
3.1.1 Attitudes to School

The data from 1994 and 2004 paint a similar picture in terms of student attitudes to school and their attendance rates, with more positive attitudes to school associated with better attendance rates. In 1994, 84 per cent of Junior Certificate students who strongly agree with the statement that 'for the most part, school life is a happy one for me' have good attendance records compared with 65 per cent of those who strongly disagree with the statement (Schools' Database, 1994). Furthermore, first year students in 2004 that have been absent from school on three or more occasions are significantly more likely to dislike school compared to those who have never been absent or only absent on occasion. Similarly, those students that have either skipped classes or have been suspended since the beginning of first year are significantly more likely to dislike school than those that have not.

Junior Certificate students who are positive about the benefits of their post-primary education in terms of increasing their self-confidence, helping them develop into a well-balanced person, being able to communicate with others and making new friends tend to have better attendance records than students who feel their education has been of 'no help' in these respects. Furthermore, students with poor attendance records are more likely to describe their school as disorganised and unfriendly than other students (Schools' Database).

Analysis of the School Leavers' Survey data found that students that skipped several days or weeks of school were significantly less likely to feel their schoolwork was worth doing: while almost 95 per cent of those who never missed school or lessons felt their schoolwork was worth doing, less than two-thirds of those who had skipped a lot of school expressed this view (Figure 3.1). Those who had skipped several days or weeks were also less likely to feel the discipline procedures in their school had been fair. In general, disaffection with school was particularly apparent among those with poor attendance records, that is, those who report having missed several days or weeks at a time. In contrast, levels of disaffection are not particularly noteworthy among students who skip an occasional lesson or day from school.

Figure 3.1: Frequency of 'Skipping' School by Students' Attitudes Towards School

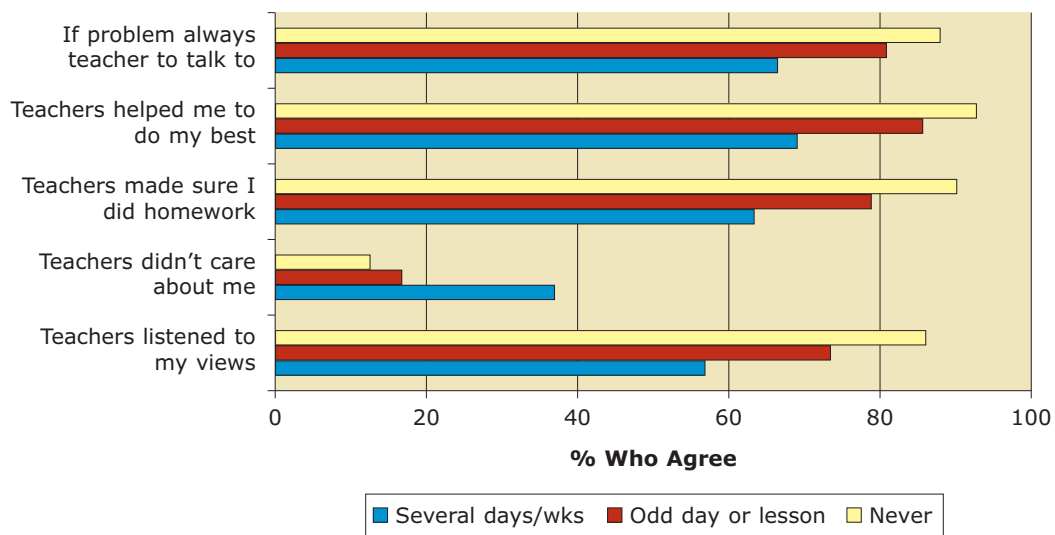


Source: Schools Leavers' Survey, 2002.

3.1.2 Relationships with Teachers

Higher levels of absenteeism are also associated with negative attitudes towards teachers (Figure 3.2). School-leavers who had skipped several days or weeks of school at a time were significantly more likely to feel their teachers did not care about them, could not talk to their teacher if they had a problem and were less likely to feel teachers listened to their views. This group of students were also less likely to feel that teachers have helped them to do their best or that teachers have made sure they complete their homework.

Figure 3.2: Frequency of 'Skipping' School by Students' Attitudes Towards Teachers



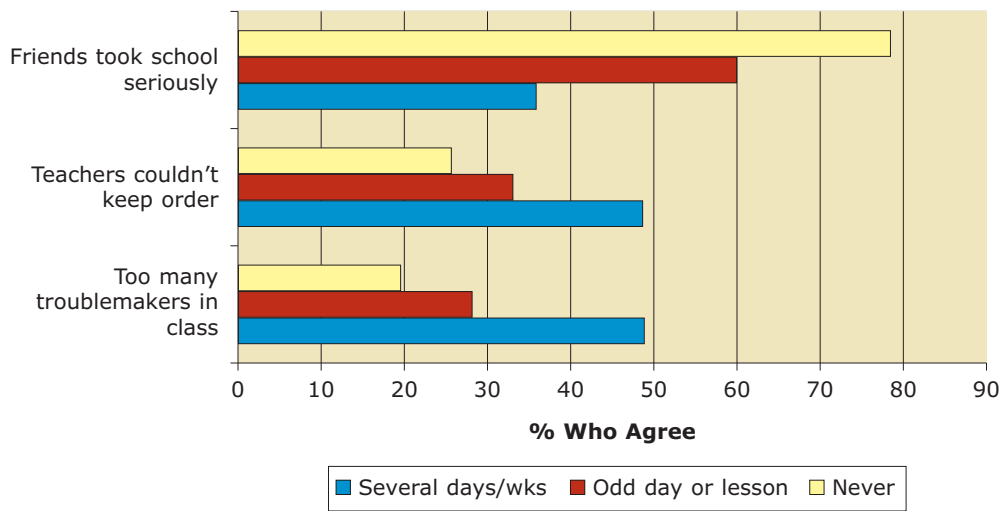
Source: Schools Leavers' Survey, 2002.

Similarly, first year students in the longitudinal study (2004) with higher levels of absenteeism, being late and skipping classes were less likely to say that they like their teachers.

3.1.3 Relationship with Peers

Attendance is also related to attitudes towards, and opinions of, peers and classmates (Figure 3.3). While 79 per cent of those who never skipped school or lessons during their last year at school felt their friends took school seriously, this figure is less than half among those who had skipped days or weeks of school. Similarly, those with poor attendance rates were significantly more likely to feel that there were too many troublemakers in their class and that teachers could not keep order in class.

Figure 3.3: Frequency of 'Skipping' School by Students' Attitudes Towards Peers



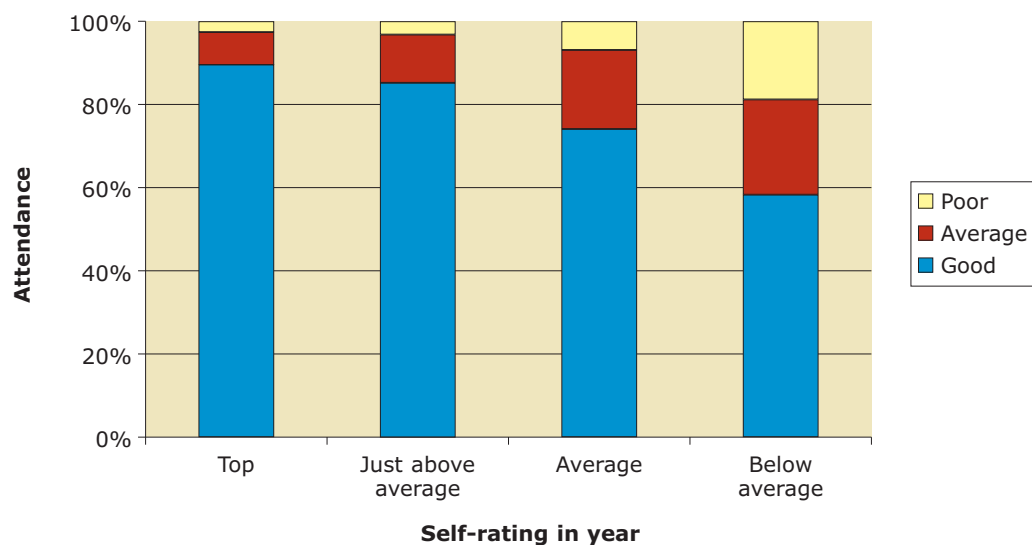
Source: Schools Leavers' Survey, 2002.

Interestingly, for Junior Certificate students in the Schools' Database 1994 and the first year students in the Junior Certificate Longitudinal Study 2004 there was no significant relationship between experiencing bullying at school and attendance levels. However, other forms of behaviour among the first year students in the Junior Certificate Longitudinal Study 2004 were associated with higher levels of experiencing bullying. Students that had skipped classes at all during first year were significantly more likely to have experienced bullying since the beginning of first year. Furthermore, students that had been suspended also report more incidences of being bullied, particularly among male students that have been suspended compared to other males.

3.1.4 Academic Self-rating

As will be discussed in Chapter 5, evidence from both the Schools' Database 1994 and the School Leavers' Survey 2002 demonstrate that levels of poor attendance are strongly related to lower educational attainment. Here we look at how the students themselves rate their academic ability. Unsurprisingly, higher levels of non-attendance are also associated with more negative views of their academic ability and educational aspirations. Junior Certificate students with poor attendance records tend to be more negative about their present academic performance and about their potential opportunities in the future (Schools' Database, 1994).

Figure 3.4: Attendance Levels by Academic Self-rating Within Year Group

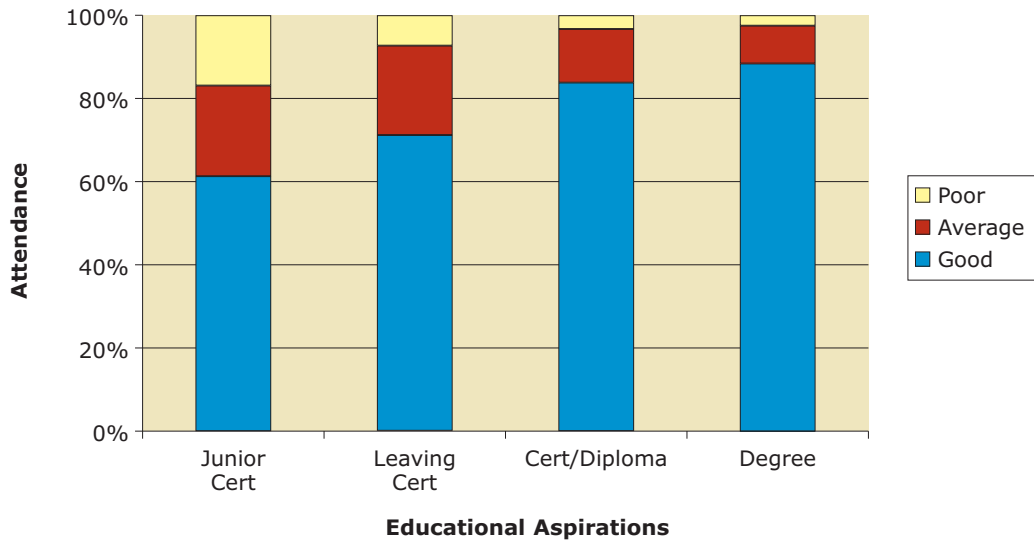


Source: Schools' Database 1994.

Students who consider themselves 'below average' within their year group at school tend to have higher absenteeism rates; 42 per cent of these students have moderate or poor attendance compared with only 10 per cent of those who consider themselves top or well above average (Figure 3.4). These patterns are also found in the case-study analysis of first year students with significantly lower academic self-image, that is students who feel they are struggling with school work, among those that have been absent on 3 or more occasions and those that have skipped classes since the start of first year (Junior Certificate Longitudinal Study, 2004).

Attendance levels are also closely related to expectations regarding examination performance; 15 per cent of those with poor attendance in third year expect to do very well in their Junior Certificate examination compared with 22 per cent of those with good attendance. Students with lower educational aspirations tend to have significantly higher absenteeism rates than those who expect to go on to higher education, indicating that they may have already started to withdraw from education; 17 per cent of those who expect to leave school after the Junior Certificate have poor attendance records compared with 3 per cent of those who expect to take a degree (Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5: Attendance Levels by Educational Aspirations



Source: Schools' Database 1994.

As early as first year (Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study, 2004), those who do not rate themselves highly academically have poorer attendance records than those who are more confident in their academic abilities. This in turn may lead to a further disaffection with school and result in an underperformance in academic tests. Engaging students from the beginning of post-primary and providing extra support to those who do not rate themselves as being academically able may be important in improving attendance records.

3.1.5 Parental Involvement

To date there has been little research examining the issue of parental involvement and school attendance. There is a small amount of research that claims that poor attendance is often related to family problems and a lack of parental involvement (Kinder *et al.*, 1996, Brown, 1983). In their study, Corville-Smith *et al.*, (1988) identified that inconsistent or lax parental discipline, parental control and perceived family conflict were associated with students with poor attendance. Among first year students (Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study, 2004) there was no relationship between how involved parents were with their child's academic life i.e., checking that homework is done, discussing how they are getting on in school and tests, and the number of absences a student has had from school during the first year of post-primary schooling. However, parental academic involvement was significantly lower for students that have been late for school on three or more occasions compared to students that have never been late. Parental academic

involvement is also significantly lower amongst students that have skipped classes. This may suggest a difference between poor attendance which parents are aware of and forms of non-attendance, such as being late and 'skipping' classes, that parents may not be aware of. More research is needed in this area to establish the relationship between parental involvement and absenteeism.

3.1.6 Student Identity

As well as attitudes to school, teachers and peers, other aspects of student personal/social development are found to be associated with absenteeism. Students with a strong sense of control over their lives tend to have better attendance records. In contrast, students with poor attendance records are more likely to have a fatalistic outlook, being more likely to agree that 'I often feel helpless in trying to deal with problems I have'. Male students with poor attendance records also tend to report higher stress levels than those with moderate or good attendance; this difference is not evident among female students.

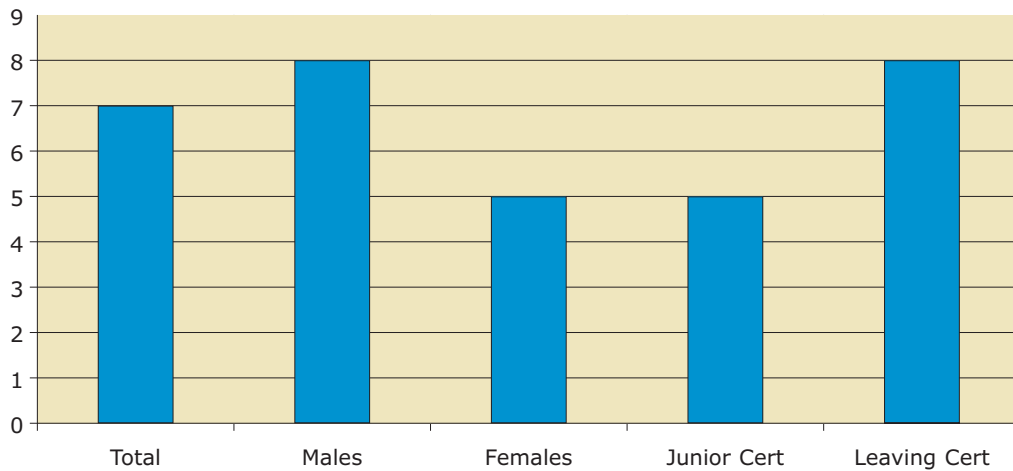
3.2 Student Life Outside School

For many post-primary students today, paid employment is a central aspect of their everyday life. Juggling school activities with paid employment, as well as social activities, appears to be the norm for teenagers today. Recent research (McCoy and Smyth, 2004) indicates that over 60 per cent of Leaving Certificate students now have a regular part-time job. An important question is whether this participation in part-time work is impacting on student attendance at school?

Students with part-time jobs do not consider their job to impact negatively on their attendance at school or school activities more generally, although such employment is seen to have an impact on students' ability to complete homework. The overwhelming response of male and female students with jobs at both Junior and Leaving Certificate levels is that their paid work does not impact on their attendance at school. Just 7 per cent of workers agree with the statement that 'as a result of working I miss more days from school' (Figure 3.6). However, nearly half of workers enjoy being at work more than being at school, with somewhat greater preference for work among male students (51 per cent) relative to females (43 per cent).

The 1994 Schools' Database allows us to look at the impact of a broader range of out-of-school activities, such as sports, social activities and domestic

Figure 3.6: Percentage Who Think it (very) Likely they Miss More Days from School as Result of Working

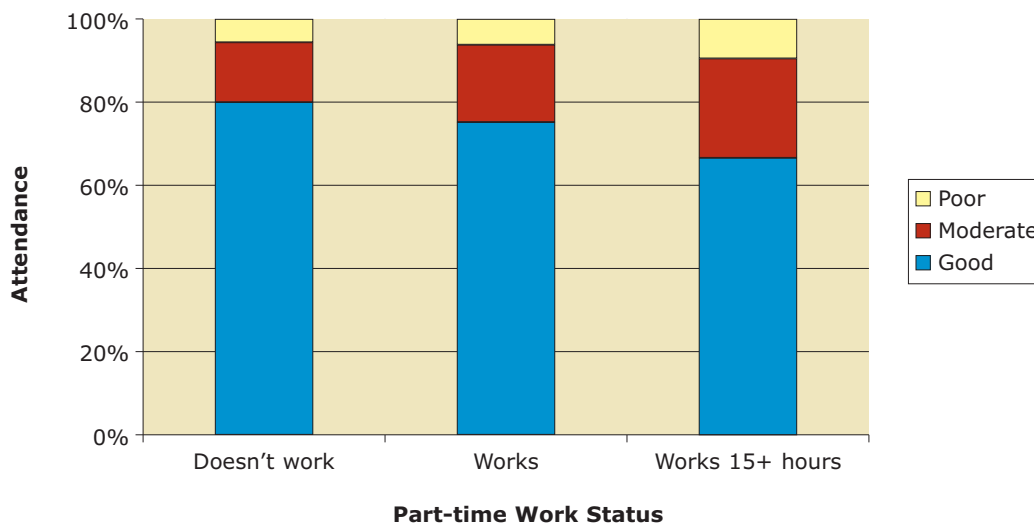


Source: Student Part-Time Work Study, 2002, published McCoy and Smyth, 2004.

responsibilities, as well as part-time work, on student attitudes towards school and school engagement and attendance.

In terms of involvement with school life, those who are highly involved in school-organised sports have better attendance records, indicating that school sports may play some part in giving students a sense of ownership over school life. In contrast, those who have a very active social life outside school (in the form of frequently going to discos/concerts/cinema, taking alcohol with friends or going on a date) tend to have higher absenteeism rates, reflecting the potential 'pull' away from school life to such social activities.

Figure 3.7: Attendance Levels by Part-time Work



Source: Schools' Database 1994.

Involvement in work activities outside school appears to impinge on engagement in school. Female students who have a high level of involvement in household labour tend to have higher absenteeism levels, although this effect is not evident for male students. Similarly, students who work part-time during term-time tend to have higher absenteeism rates. This pattern is especially evident for those working longer hours, that is, fifteen or more hours per week (Figure 3.7). This is not necessarily a causal relationship since students who are more disaffected with school life may seek an alternative outlet through paid employment. Evidence from these findings are somewhat different to those emerging from the more recent 2001 survey described above. These differences may relate to student perception versus the reality of the situation. Although students themselves in the 2001 survey did not feel that their part-time working equated to poorer attendance at school, the 2004 data may show that in reality students that work do have poorer attendance at school.

3.3 Summary

It is unsurprising that students who have poor attendance rates generally report negative attitudes to school and teachers, however, these subjective characteristics of students give us an insight into how poor attenders view their school experience. This chapter has shown the negative nature of their relationship with many aspects of school life. Poor attenders not only dislike school but are significantly less likely to think school life 'is happy for them' and feels that it is in fact 'unfriendly'. They are more likely to think their teachers 'do not care about them' and that the school rules are 'unfair'.

The fact that academically poor attenders have lower rates of performance and do not have confidence in their academic ability is unsurprising when we see that less than 66 per cent of those with poor attendance even think their school work is worth doing. This has obvious implications for the provision of extra assistance for students with academic difficulties and also for creating an interesting learning environment. The challenge is to engage these students with more innovative teaching and learning strategies and to create a greater sense of attachment and ownership of school life.

In conclusion, students' withdrawal from school appears to reflect a disaffection with school life. From a policy perspective, this is an interesting finding since student attitudes to school have been found to reflect school climate as well as personal characteristics. Thus, a more positive school climate, especially in terms of creating a happy, supportive, interesting learning environment and promoting positive interaction with teachers is likely to have positive benefits in terms of student attendance and retention. The following chapter deals with issues at the school level by looking at school factors which are associated with attendance.

Chapter 4: School Factors and Attendance

4.1 Introduction

Previous chapters have explored the way in which individual student characteristics influence their attendance levels. This chapter focuses on the extent of variation among different types of schools, and among individual schools themselves, in the level of attendance among students. There are a number of potential reasons why schools may differ in attendance patterns. First, students from more disadvantaged backgrounds and those with lower academic ability levels are more likely to be regularly absent from school (see above). As a result, schools with a high concentration of these students will have higher overall absenteeism levels. Secondly, school organisation and climate are likely to have differential effects on students' perceptions of school life, which in turn will affect their engagement and participation (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). Finally, the way in which schools monitor and respond to absenteeism is also likely to affect student behaviour in this respect, although little research has been carried out on this issue in Ireland or internationally. This chapter assesses whether schools do, in fact, differ in their attendance levels and explores some of the factors underlying these patterns.

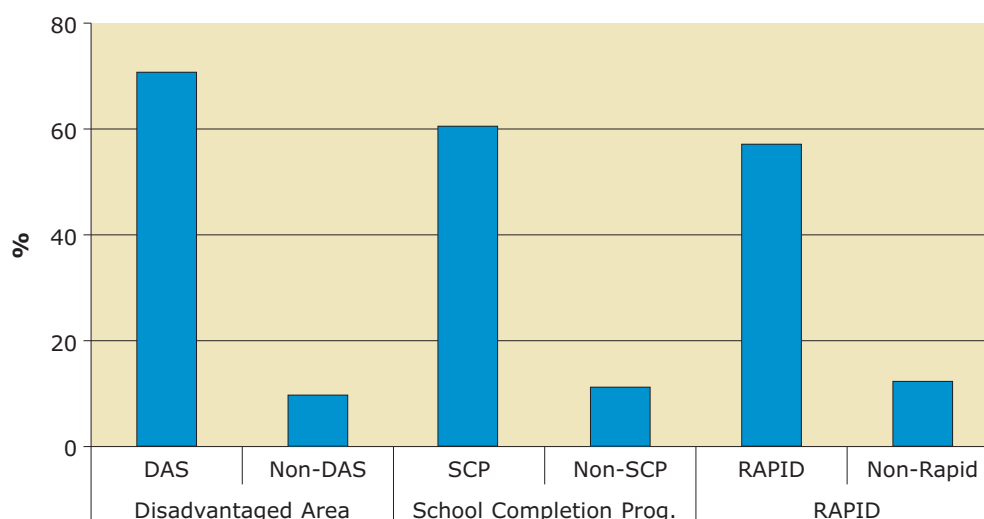
4.2 Variation in Attendance

Much less is known about the processes shaping attendance levels in the primary sector so much of this chapter focuses on post-primary schools. However, National Educational Welfare Board data for 2003/4 provide a useful insight into the extent of variation in the primary sector. On average, primary school pupils are absent from school for an average of 11 days per year with just over a tenth of pupils being absent for more than 20 days in the school year. Absenteeism levels in the primary sector in Ireland are much lower than in post-primary schools (see below), a pattern which is consistent with that found elsewhere (see, for example, NIAO, 2004). These levels are related to the nature of the student intake and to school size.

Three school-level characteristics can be taken as proxies for the socio-economic composition of the school: participation in the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme (DAS), participation in the School Completion Programme and involvement in the RAPID programme. It should be recognised, however, that these are quite crude measures of socio-economic composition and that there will be a good deal of

variation among schools in these categories. Primary schools serving more disadvantaged student populations are markedly more likely to have low (<92 per cent) attendance levels than other schools (Figure 4.1). Furthermore, larger primary schools are more likely than smaller schools to have low attendance levels, that is, less than 92 per cent attendance over the school year. On closer investigation, school size has an impact only in designated disadvantaged schools; among these schools, primary schools with fewer than 100 pupils tend to have higher attendance levels. This may relate to more cohesive relationships between teachers, pupils and parents in smaller schools serving disadvantaged communities but this cannot be established using available data.

Figure 4.1: Proportion of Primary Schools with Low (<92%) Attendance by Socio-economic Profile of School



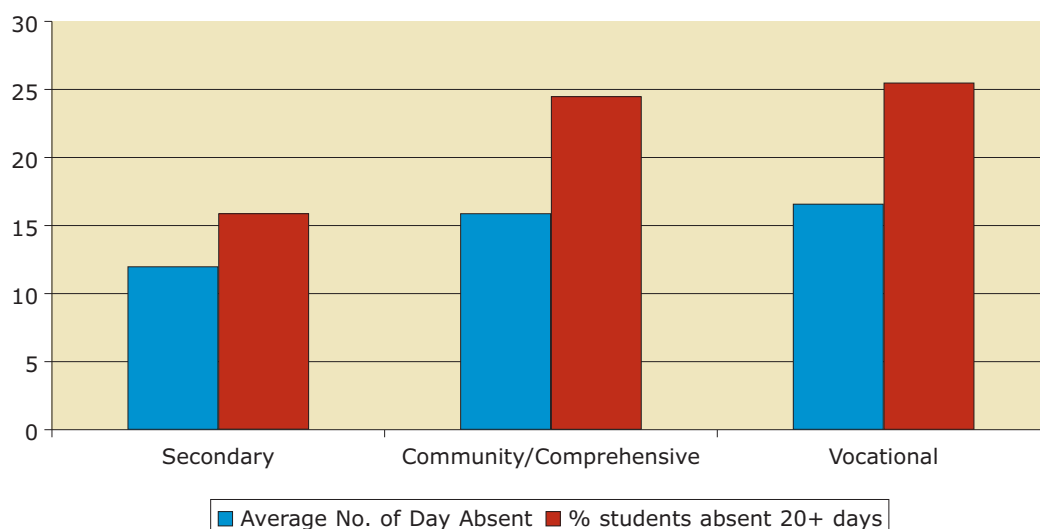
Source: NEWB 2003/4.

More detailed analyses indicate that, among primary schools, attendance is significantly related to certain key socio-economic characteristics: the proportion of families headed by unemployed breadwinners and lone parents; parents with medical cards; those living in local authority housing; in receipt of Farmers' Allowance and the proportion of pupils for whom a book grant is received by the school (Weir, 2004). A strong relationship is also evident between reading and numeracy scores and absenteeism rates in primary schools, with lower test performance levels found in schools with lower attendance levels (Weir, 2004). This pattern is likely to reflect two processes: lower attendance levels among schools with a high concentration of students with initially lower ability levels but also the potential impact of absenteeism on progress in reading and numeracy among pupils.

Differences between schools in their attendance levels are also evident in the post-primary sector. In the 1990s, considerable variation across individual schools in their average attendance levels was found; in 1994, schools ranged from having no students with moderate (80-90 per cent) or poor (<80 per cent) attendance to having 57 per cent of all Junior Certificate students in the school with moderate or poor attendance (Schools' Database, 1994). Variation was also evident across school sectors: poor attendance was most prevalent among students, particularly male students, in vocational schools with better attendance records found among students in voluntary secondary schools. On closer investigation, differences in intake between the school types were the main factor accounting for differences between school types in their absenteeism levels (Smyth, 1999).

Differences between school types in their attendance levels have persisted over time. National Educational Welfare Board data (2003/4) indicate that the highest levels of non-attendance are found in vocational and community/comprehensive schools with the lowest levels found in the secondary sector (Figure 4.2). Vocational schools are found to make up two-thirds of post-primary schools with low attendance levels (that is, less than 88 per cent attendance) while they make up just over a third of all post-primary schools. This pattern is most likely related to differences between school types in the socio-economic composition of their student intake (see below).

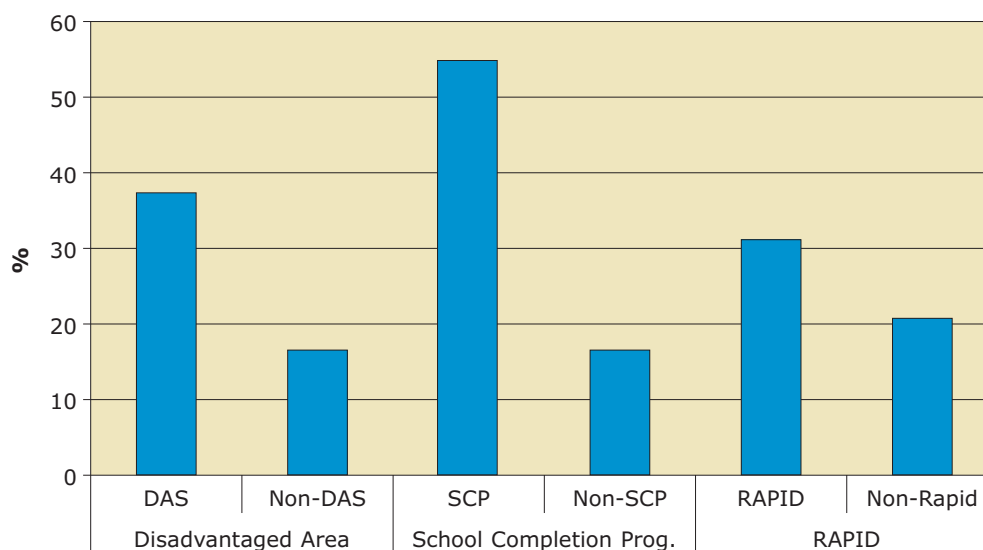
Figure 4.2: Prevalence of Non-attendance by Post-primary School Type



Source: NEWB 2003/4.

Among post-primary schools, smaller schools tend to have higher levels of non-attendance; schools with fewer than 200 students are significantly over-represented among schools with low attendance. This pattern is difficult to explain, given that smaller schools have better attendance records within the primary sector. It may be that more accurate attendance information is possible in smaller schools or that smaller schools are being 'creamed off' in the context of demographic trends. It may also be related to aspects of student intake not captured in the dataset. As in the primary sector, post-primary schools serving disadvantaged student populations are over-represented among those with lower attendance levels (Figure 4.3). Other analysis (Weir, 2004) has also found that attendance is related to other school characteristics including the proportion of medical card holders, retention rates to Junior Certificate and performance in the Junior Certificate examination. The relationship between attendance and socio-economic variables and achievement variables is weaker in rural schools than in schools in urban areas (see Weir, 2004).

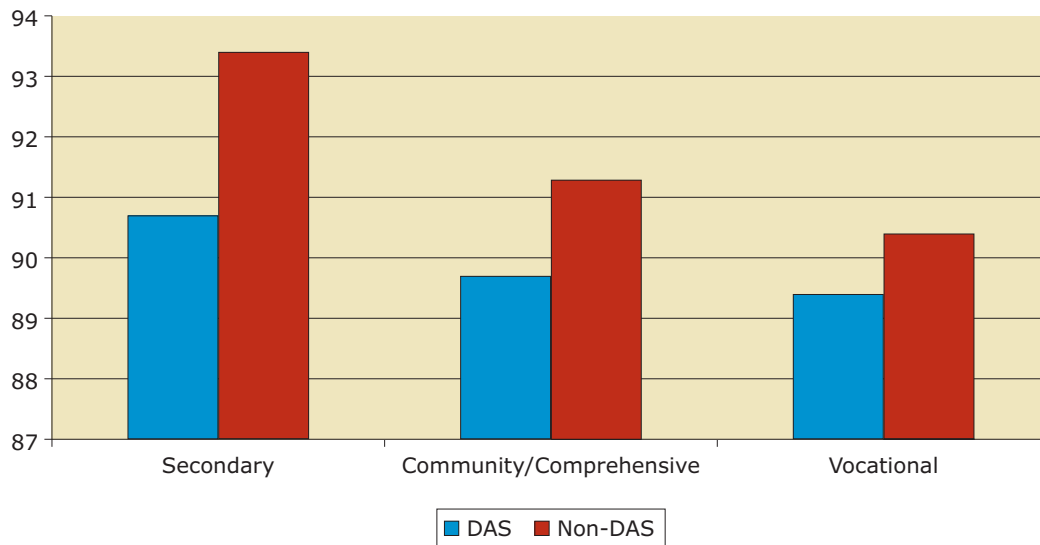
Figure 4.3: Proportion of Post-primary Schools with Low (<88%) Attendance by Socio-economic Profile of School



Source: NEWB 2003/4.

Much of the variation between school sectors is found to be related to whether they have designated disadvantaged status or not. However, among non-disadvantaged schools, vocational and community/comprehensive schools continue to have higher absenteeism rates (Figure 4.4). It should be noted that there is likely to be considerable variation in student intake (social and ability mix) among non-designated disadvantaged schools.

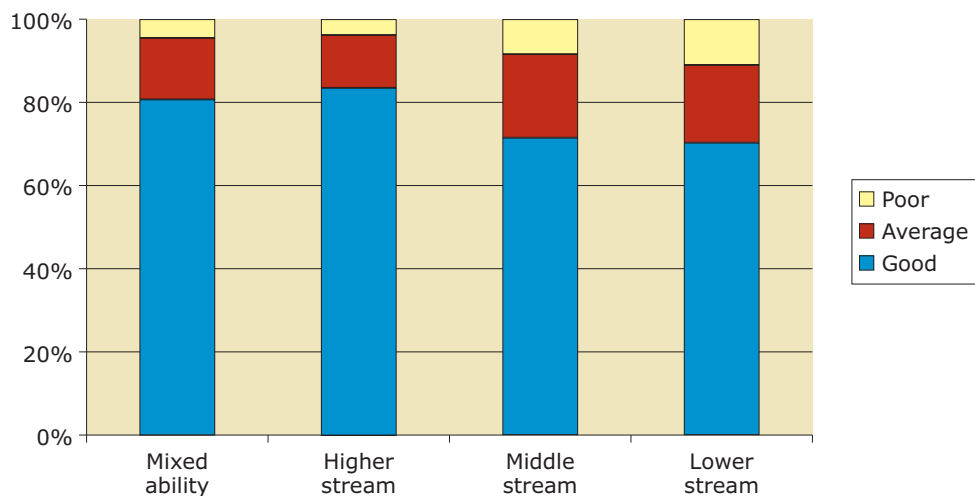
Figure 4.4: Annual Percentage Absenteeism Rate by Post-primary School Type



Source: NEWB 2003/4.

Certain schools have higher absenteeism levels not only because they have a higher proportion of 'at-risk' students but also because the mix of students in a particular school can make a difference to attendance rates. Students attending predominantly working-class schools tend to have higher absenteeism levels, regardless of their own social background (Smyth, 1999). Even controlling for the social mix, however, individual schools differ in their attendance levels (Smyth, 1999). Thus, some schools are more successful than others at promoting student attendance. The reasons for such success lie, at least in part, in key aspects of the way schools are organised and in their overall climate. Thus even when we

Figure 4.5: Attendance Levels among Junior Certificate Students by Ability Group of Class



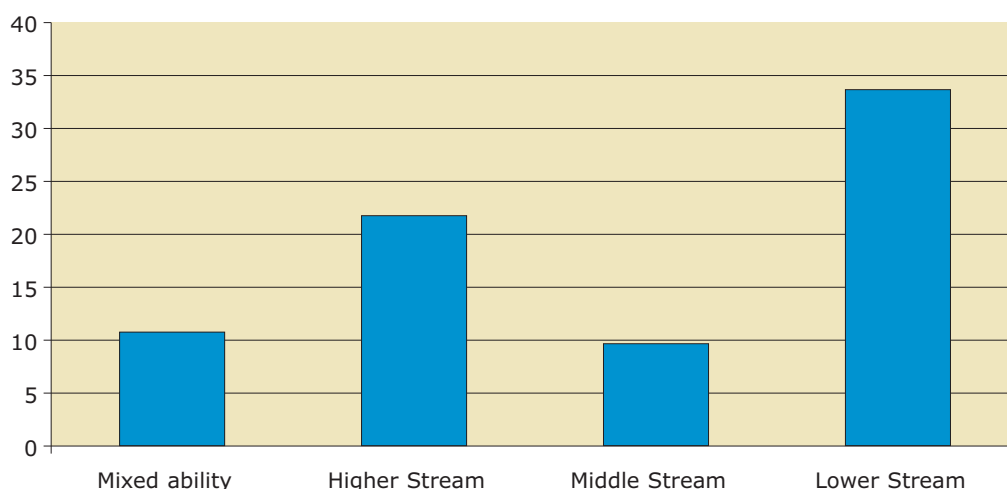
Source: Schools' Database 1994.

take account of the kinds of students who attend the school, some schools are more successful at promoting attendance.

4.3 School Factors and Attendance

One important aspect of school organisation is the approach to ability grouping, that is, the way in which students are allocated to their base classes. Variation in attendance is found between classes in streamed schools, that is, schools where students are allocated to their base classes depending on their assessed ability levels. Absenteeism levels are found to be highest among students in lower stream classes and lower among those in higher stream and mixed ability classes (Figure 4.5). Case-study evidence on first year students indicates that, even at this early stage in the junior cycle, students in lower stream classes are more likely to have skipped classes on at least one occasion; in fact, over a third of students in the case-study schools had done so over the course of first year (Figure 4.6). Furthermore, first year students in lower stream classes are much more likely to have been absent from school because of suspension than students in other classes, reflecting higher levels of misbehaviour (Smyth *et al.*, 2004; Smyth *et al.*, 2006). Differential attendance patterns by ability group are related to two processes. First, lower stream classes are by their nature disproportionately made up of lower ability students, who are at greater risk of absenteeism. Second, lower stream students have been found to be more disaffected with school life and their greater tendency to skip class is likely to be related to this disengagement (Smyth *et al.*, 2006).

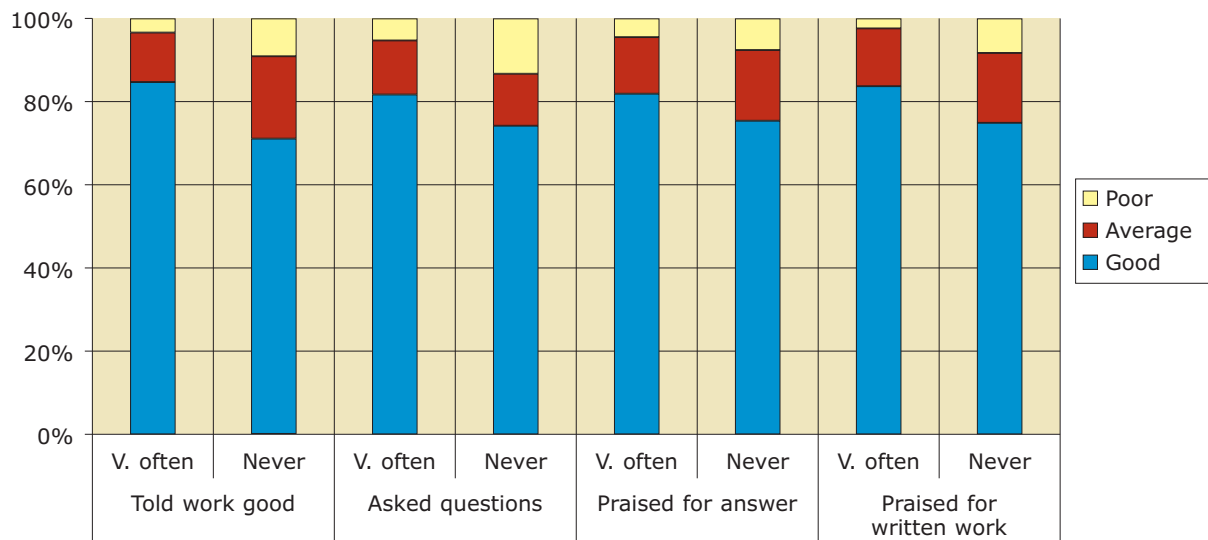
Figure 4.6: Proportion of First Year Students in Case-study Schools Who Have 'Skipped Class' by Ability Grouping



Source: Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study.

Attendance levels are not only related to the way in which schools organise learning but also to the social climate of the school and classroom. The academic climate of the school plays a role in reducing student absenteeism; attendance rates are higher in schools characterised by higher teacher expectations (that is, where teachers expect students to go on to higher education), even controlling for the student's own aspirations for the future (Smyth, 1999).

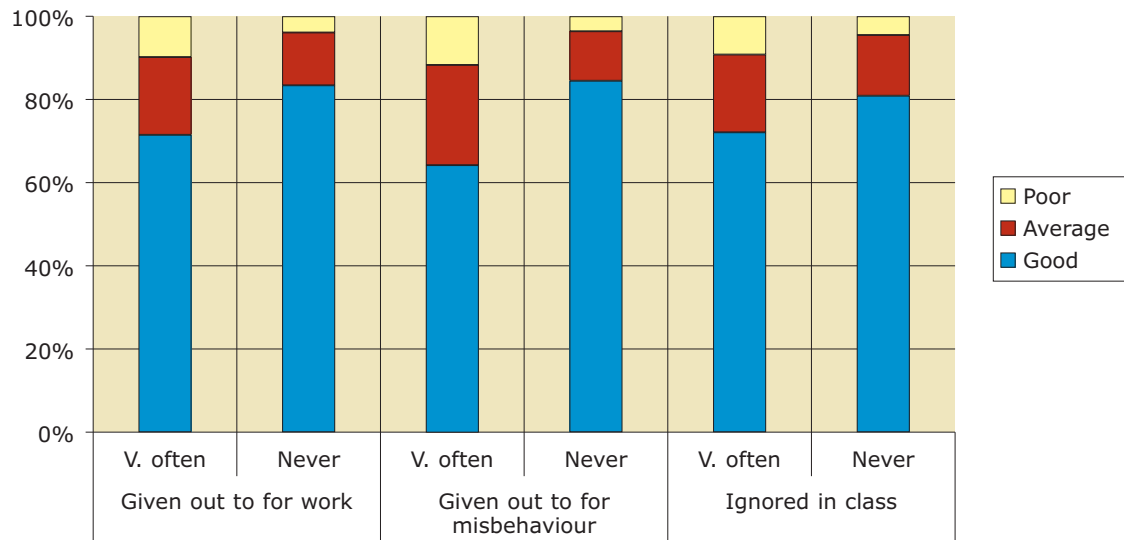
Figure 4.7: Attendance Levels Among Junior Certificate Students by Frequency of Positive Teacher-Student Interaction



Source: Schools' Database 1994.

The social climate of the school and classroom, particularly the nature of the interaction between teachers and students, is also found to be significantly associated with attendance rates. Students who have experienced frequent positive interaction with their teachers, in the form of praise or even being asked questions in class, are much less likely to be absent from school on a regular basis than those who have not experienced such interaction (Figure 4.7). On the other hand, students who have experienced negative interaction with their teachers, that is, who have been 'given out to' or ignored, are much more likely than other students to be absent from school (Figure 4.8). These patterns have been found at Junior Certificate level but are also evident even as early as first year. It is, of course, likely that the disciplinary climate and school policy towards absenteeism will also affect attendance levels. However, such detailed information is not available in the Irish context and this issue could usefully form the basis for future research.

Figure 4.8: Attendance Levels Among Junior Certificate Students by Frequency of Negative Teacher-Student Interaction

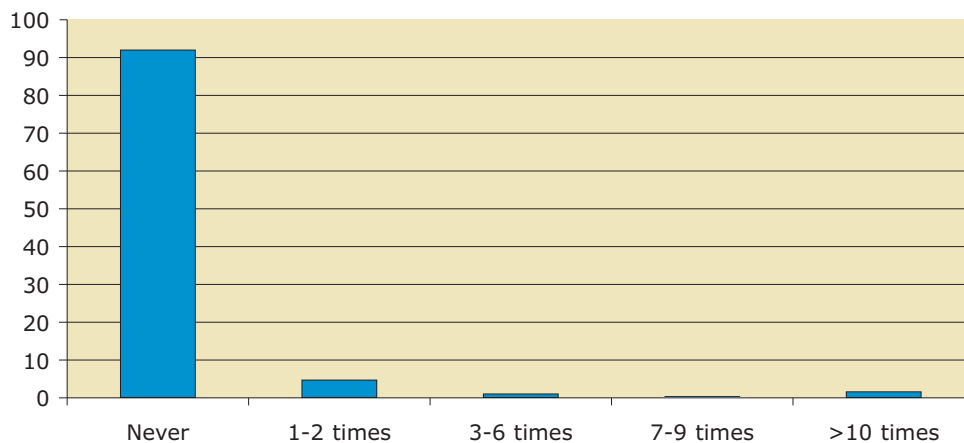


Source: Schools' Database 1994.

4.4 Suspension from School

The Junior Cycle Longitudinal Data survey also collected information on the extent to which first year students had been suspended from school during their first year in post-primary school. This allows us to examine the extent to which schools utilise this form of reprimand for student behaviour, the types of students who are most likely to be suspended from school and it also allows us to examine the extent to which suspension from school is related to other forms of mis-behaviour such as absenteeism, arriving late to school and skipping class. The majority of first years said that they had not been suspended from school from September to May of first year. Only 8 per cent of first years had been suspended on at least one occasion.

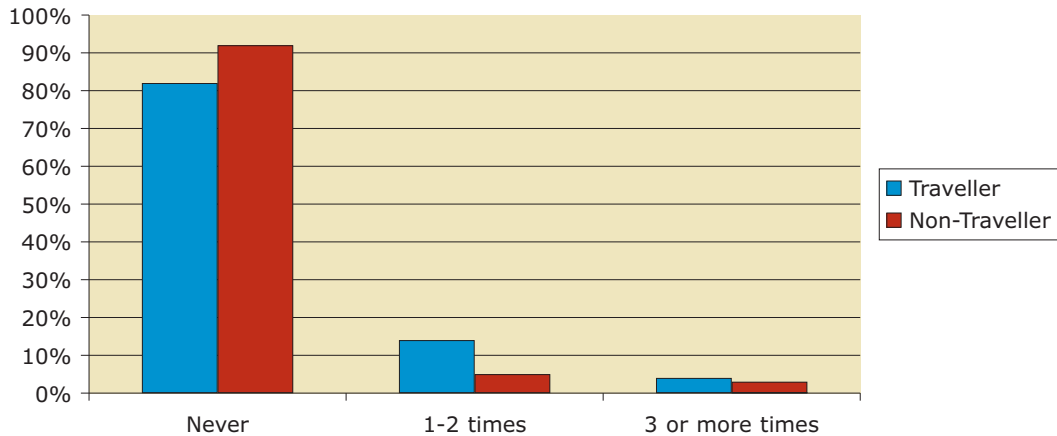
Figure 4.9: Number of Times Suspended Since September



Source: Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study.

There were no significant differences in the social class background of pupils and the number of times they had been suspended from school since September of first year. Students from a Traveller background were significantly more likely to have been suspended compared to other students. There were no differences between students of a non-national background and other pupils.

Figure 4.10: Number of Times Suspended Since September

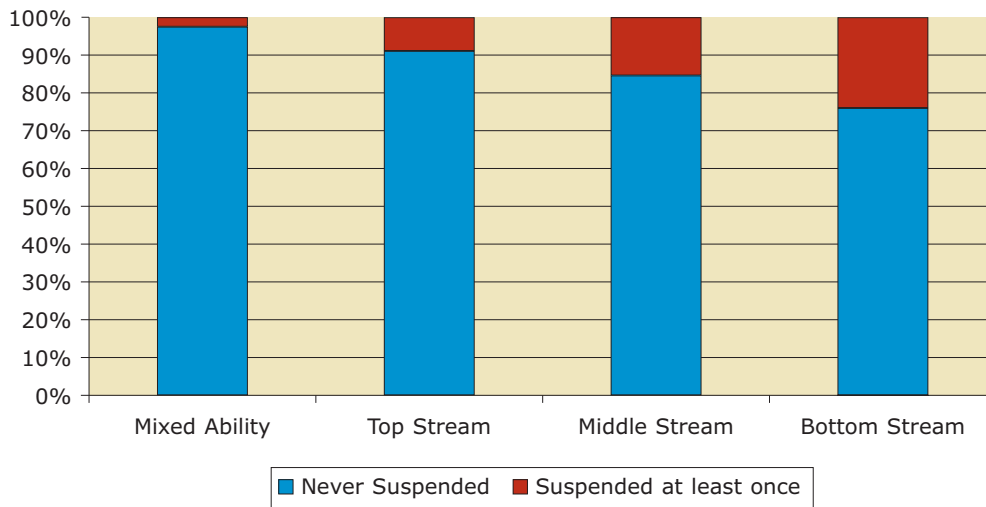


Source: Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study.

Boys were also significantly more likely to have been suspended since September of first year compared to girls (4 per cent of girls had been suspended on at least one occasion compared to 10 per cent of boys). This is also true within co-educational schools.

Students were examined in two groups, never and have been suspended. It is unsurprising that students who have been suspended from school are significantly more likely to dislike school, dislike their teachers and have more negative interactions with their teachers. Students who have been suspended also report more incidences of being bullied. Girls who have been suspended do not experience more incidences of being bullied, however, male students who have been suspended do experience significantly more bullying than male students who have not been suspended. In addition, as shown in Figure 4.11, students in lower stream classes are significantly more likely to have been suspended.

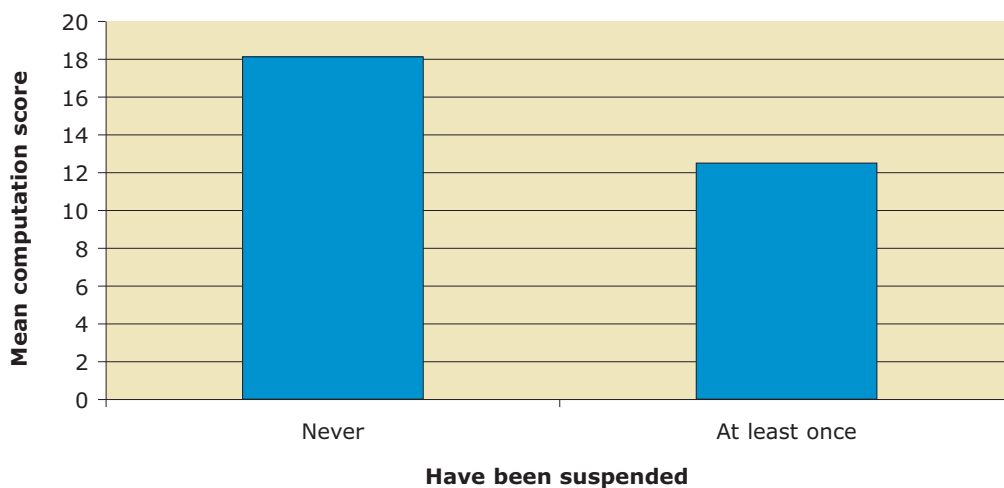
Figure 4.11: Suspension and Ability Grouping



Source: Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study.

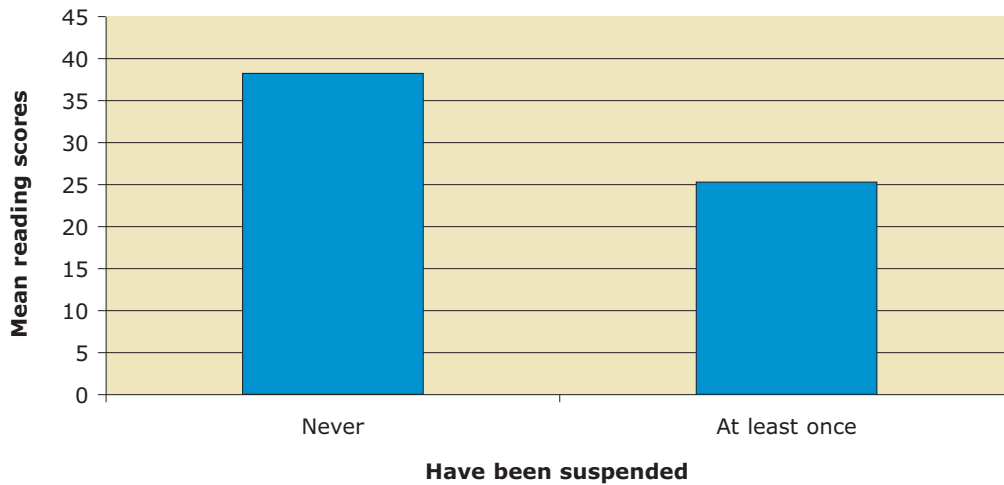
There was a significantly lower academic self-rating among students who had been suspended and unsurprisingly, there were significantly lower reading and computation scores among students who had been suspended (Figures 4.12 and 4.13). However, it is surprising that there were no significant differences in parental academic involvement and whether students had been suspended or not.

Figure 4.12: Computation Scores and Suspension



Source: Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study.

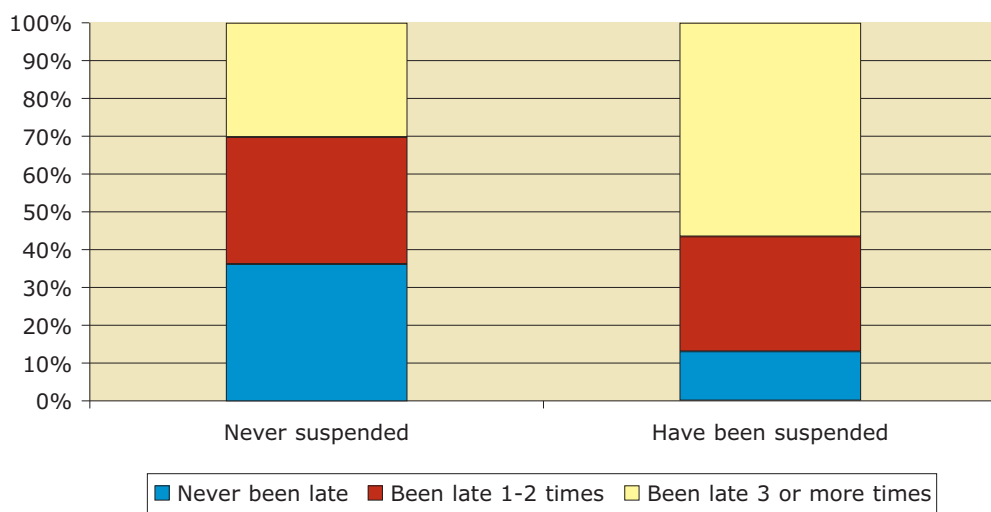
Figure 4.13: Reading Scores and Suspension



Source: Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study.

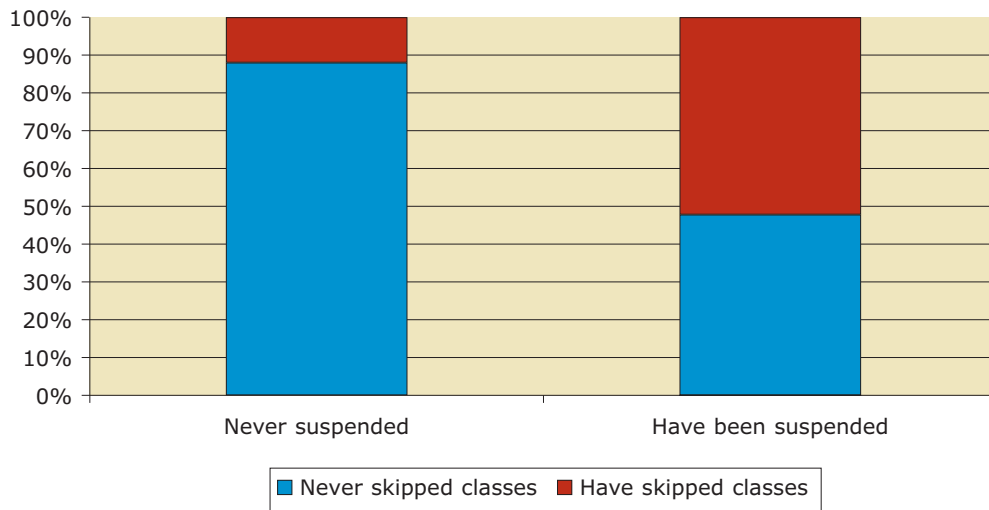
When we look at whether students have been suspended since September of First Year it is interesting to look at the occurrence of other behaviours such as absenteeism or being late. The analysis shows that students who have been suspended are also more likely to be absent, late or to skip classes on more occasions, however the differences between those who have been suspended and those who have not and their number of absences is not statistically significant. From Figure 4.15 we can see that approximately half of students that have been suspended have also skipped classes. Indeed, some students may have received a suspension for skipping classes. Furthermore, just under half of students that have been suspended have been absent since September on seven or more occasions.

Figure 4.14: Being Suspended and Being Late



Source: Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study.

Figure 4.15: Being Suspended and Skipping Classes



Source: Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study.

4.5 Summary

In summary, this chapter has shown that attendance rates are found to vary by school type, school size and student mix. The fact that schools serving a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience particular difficulties with attendance indicates the potential for targeting policy initiatives towards such schools. Moreover, it is clear that school climate, policy and practice can in itself 'make a difference'. Students appear to respond to positive interaction with teachers and to teacher expectations in terms of their attendance levels. As a result, developing measures to promote a positive school climate and higher expectations for students should form a focus for future policy development since such initiatives are likely to facilitate student engagement and yield higher attendance levels.

The analysis also points to the strong relationship between school sanctions such as suspension and other aspects of school attendance such as being late and 'skipping' class. It raises important questions over the most effective ways of addressing disciplinary issues in schools.

Chapter 5: Outcome of Poor Attendance At School

5.1 Introduction

Policy concern about attendance has often focused on the impact of absenteeism on educational outcomes, such as school retention and examination performance, as well as on young people's later life-chances. This section focuses on the impact of poor attendance on four sets of outcomes in the Irish context: early school leaving, examination performance at both Junior and Leaving Certificate levels, progression to post-school study and unemployment in the early labour market career. In so doing, we are not asserting that these are the only outcomes of concern, since poor attendance is likely to impact on broader aspects of young people's personal and social development. However, these outcomes are more amenable to measurement in surveys and such outcomes have been found to have far-reaching consequences for life-chances in adult life.

5.2 Attendance and Early School Leaving

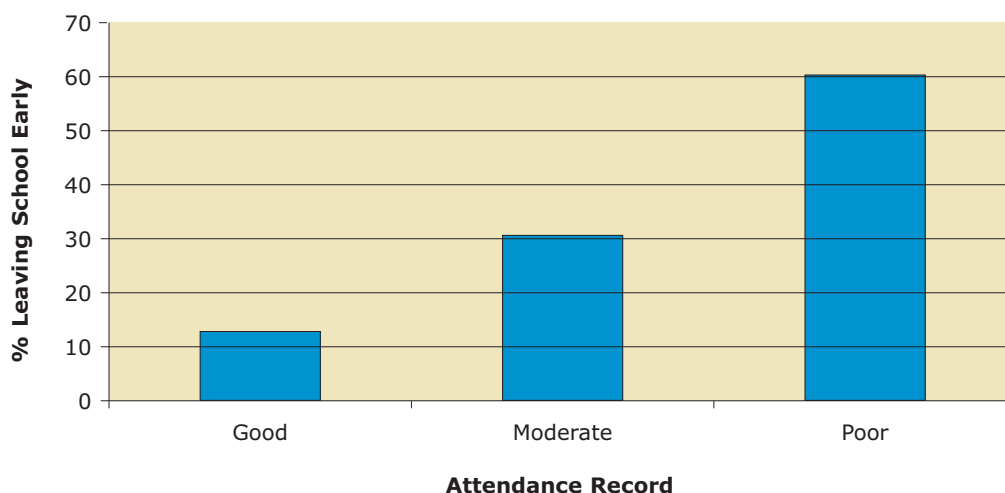
While the focus of this report is on attendance, attendance and early school leaving have been found to be closely interrelated in many international studies (Farrington, 1980; Wagner *et al.*, 2004). Students' withdrawal from educational participation may be preceded by a period of recurring, perhaps escalating, absenteeism. For the purposes of these analyses of the 1994 Schools' Database, 'early school leaving' is taken to refer to students who left school between January/February of Junior Certificate year and the Leaving Certificate examination. The chapter begins by looking at the relationship between absenteeism, students' intentions to leave school early and their actual behaviour. The analysis then examines variation in early school-leaving rates in terms of (i) student background characteristics; (ii) student attitudes to school; and (iii) school characteristics. It finds that many of the factors which have been found to be associated with attendance behaviour in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are similarly related to early school leaving.

5.2.1 Absenteeism and Early School Leaving

Early school leaving appears to be preceded by a period of recurrent absenteeism on the part of students. There is a close link between attendance levels in Junior

Certificate year and subsequent early school-leaving rates; 60 per cent of students with poor attendance leave school early compared with 13 per cent of those with good attendance (Figure 5.1). From a policy perspective, this indicates the potential benefits of targeting student absenteeism in terms of school retention.

Figure 5.1: Early School Leaving by Attendance Record at Junior Cycle



Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

Given the close relationship between attendance behaviour and subsequent early school leaving, the analysis will now focus on the relationship between early school leaving and a range of social background, attitudinal and school level characteristics, examining the extent to which early school-leaving rates are similarly differentiated by gender, social background, attitudes towards school and school climate, for example.

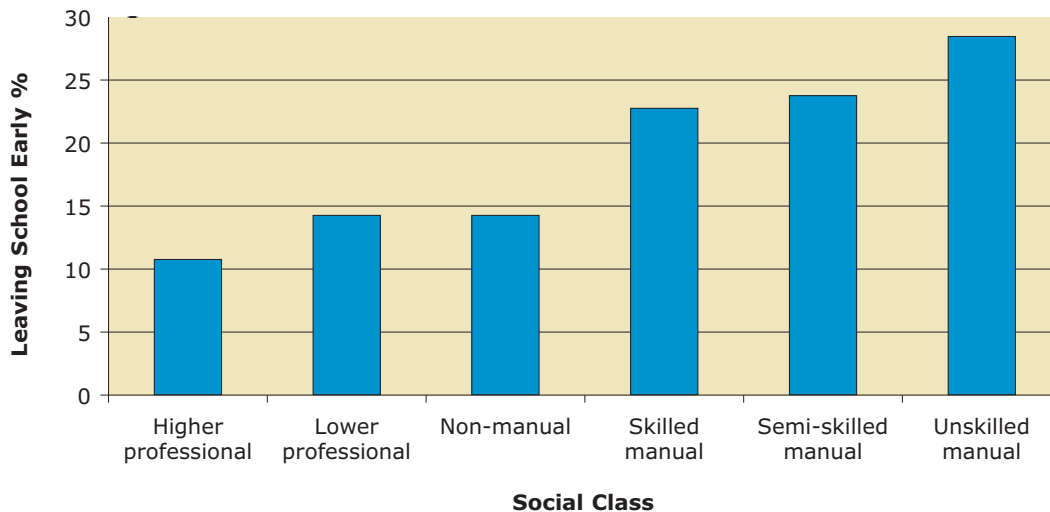
5.2.2 Student Background Characteristics

A total of 19 per cent of the Junior Certificate students sampled in 1994 left school before the Leaving Certificate examination. Male students were significantly more likely to drop out of school than female students; 23 per cent of male students left school compared with 14 per cent of female students. Older students were significantly more likely than their younger counterparts to leave school early.

In common with attendance levels, early school-leaving rates are strongly structured by family background characteristics. Of students from unskilled manual backgrounds 29 per cent leave school before the Leaving Certificate

compared with 11 per cent of those from higher professional backgrounds (Figure 5.2). A similar pattern is found if parental education is considered. Of students whose mothers left school at primary level 23 per cent leave school early themselves compared with 12 per cent of those whose mothers had a third-level degree.

Figure 5.2: Early School Leaving by Social Class Background



Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

As might be expected, early school-leaving rates are significantly related to educational underperformance on the part of the students. On standardised tests in verbal and numerical ability taken in the third year of post-primary education, students who subsequently dropped out of school scored an average of 33.6 compared with an average score of 49.5 among students who stayed on to Leaving Certificate level. Similarly, students who left school early achieved lower average grades¹² in their Junior Certificate (4.5 compared with 7 among those who remained in school).

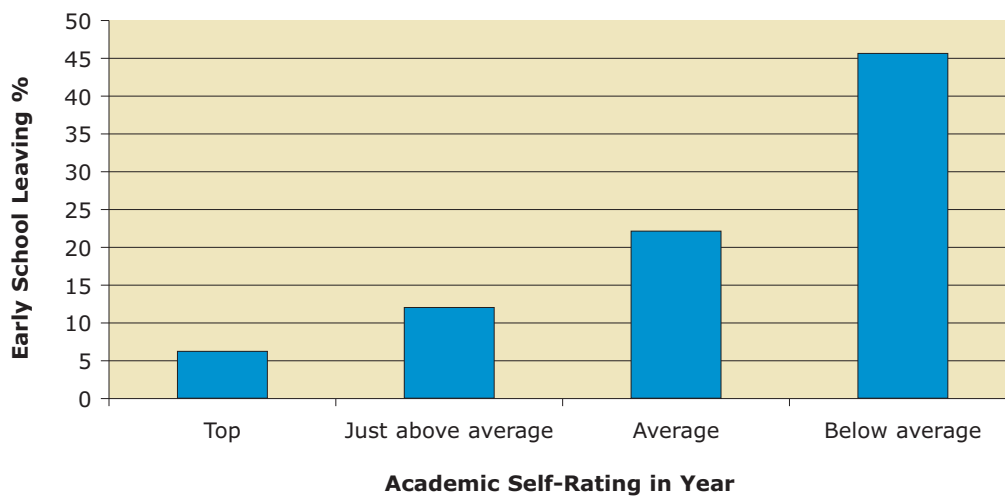
5.2.3 Student Attitudes to School

As well as reflecting actual performance levels, early school leaving is also significantly related to how students feel they are doing in school, as was also found for attendance patterns in Chapter 3. Students who rated themselves as below average within their year group at Junior Certificate level were significantly

¹² Each subject was scored from 0 to 10, reflecting both grade achieved and level taken, and averaged across all exam subject.

more likely to drop out of school than those with more positive views of their academic abilities (Figure 5.3). A similar pattern is evident in terms of student expectations regarding how well they expected to do in the Junior Certificate examination (four months before the actual examination); 41 per cent of those who felt they would do 'well below average' subsequently left school compared with 16 per cent of those who expected to do 'very well'.

Figure 5.3: Early School Leaving by Academic Self-rating Within Year Group

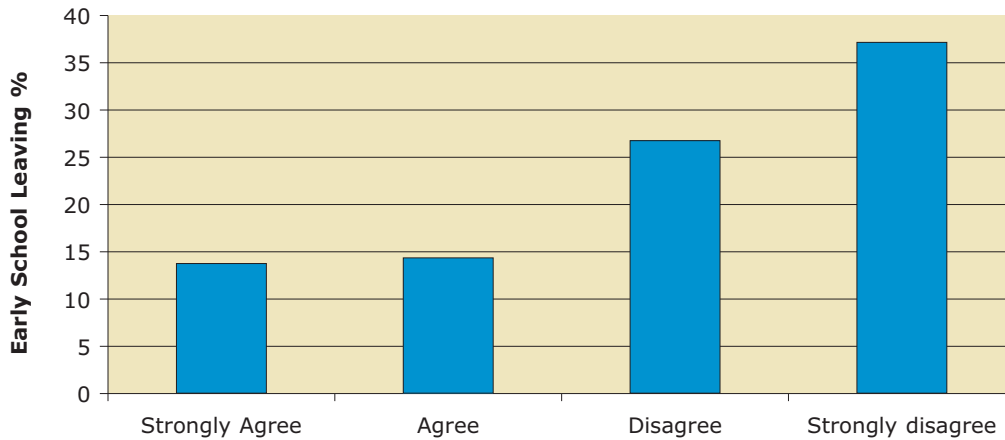


Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

Students who leave school early tend to have less sense of control over their lives than those who stay on in the system; 26 per cent of those who disagreed with the statement that 'there is a lot I can do to change my life if I really want to' left school early compared with 18 per cent of those who strongly agreed with the statement. As might be expected, attitudes to school were significantly more negative among those who left school early. Of those who strongly agreed with the statement that 'for the most part, school life is a happy one for me' 14 per cent dropped out of school compared with 37 per cent of those who strongly disagreed with the statement (Figure 5.4).

Students who left school early were much less likely to see that their post-primary education had benefited them in terms of increasing their self-confidence, helping them develop into a well-balanced person, being able to talk and communicate well with others and helping them to make new friends. In each case, students who felt school had been 'a lot' of help in these respects were less likely to drop

Figure 5.4: Early School Leaving by Attitudes to School ('For the most part, school life is a happy one for me')

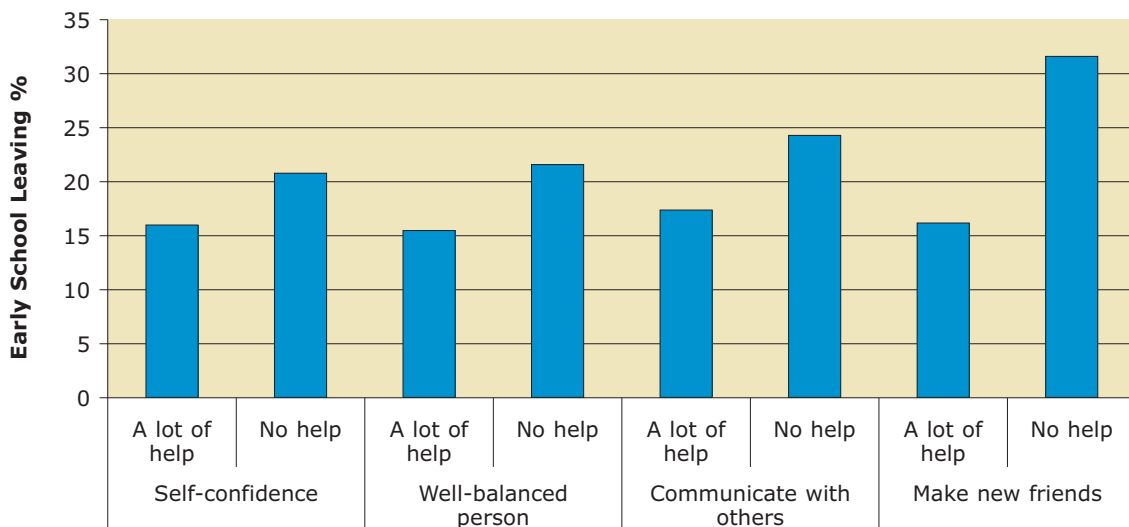


Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

out of school than those who felt their education had been of 'no help' (Figure 5.5). This difference between the two groups is particularly marked in relation to making new friends, a pattern which appears to indicate that integration into friendship networks within school facilitates retention within full-time education.

In terms of involvement in school life, students with a high level of involvement in social activities outside school tend to have higher early school-leaving rates. Students who went to a disco; concert or cinema; took alcohol with friends or

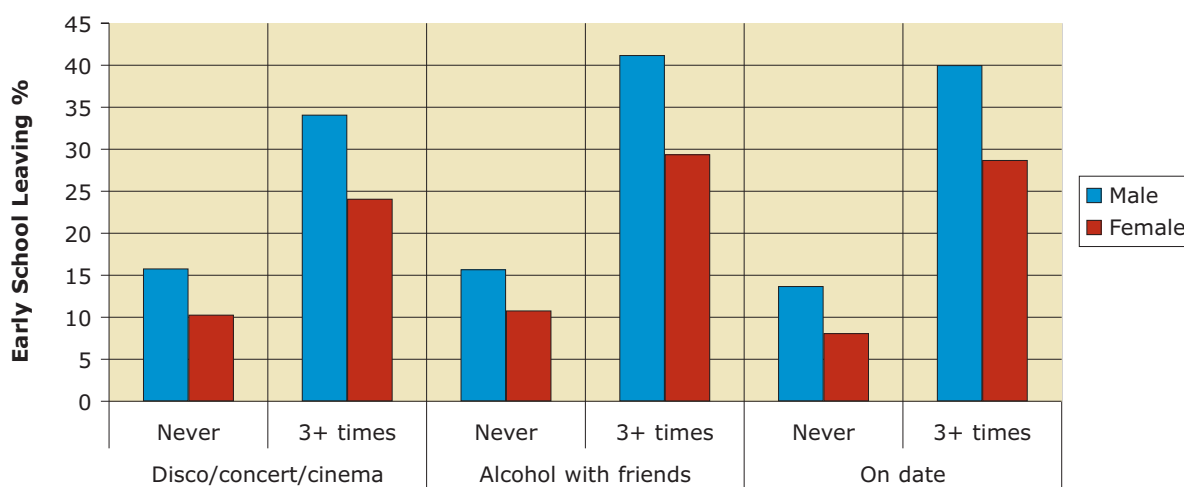
Figure 5.5: Early School Leaving by Perceived Benefits of Post-primary Education



Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

went on a date frequently in third year were more likely to leave school subsequently than those who were less involved in such social activities (Figure 5.6). This pattern applies to both male and female students but early school-leaving rates are higher among male students in each category. Similar to the findings for the impact of part-time work on attendance in Chapter 3, social activities seems to have the effect of pulling students away from school life and academic activities.

Figure 5.6: Early School Leaving by Involvement in Social Activities



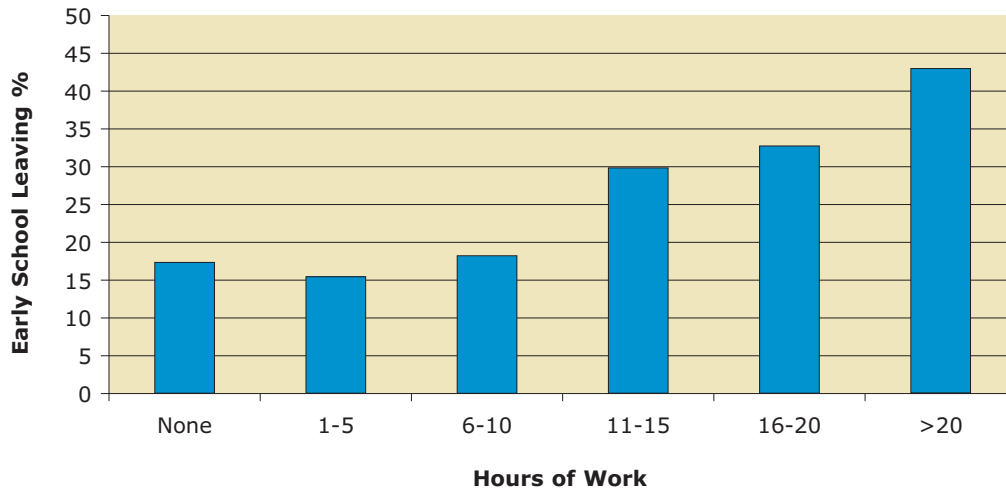
Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

Involvement in work activities outside school is also significantly associated with early school leaving. Female students with a high level of involvement in household labour are more likely to drop out of school than those with lower levels of involvement, a pattern which does not apply to male students. While working part-time was found to impact negatively on attendance at school, students who work part-time during term-time in third year are also more likely to leave school subsequently than those who did not work. The prevalence of early school leaving is also related to the hours of work (see Figure 5.7).

5.2.4 School Characteristics

There was considerable variation across individual post-primary schools in their early school-leaving rates for the 1994 cohort; the prevalence of early school leaving varied from 2 per cent to 67 per cent across the sampled schools. Early school-leaving rates are found to vary by school sector; early school leaving is

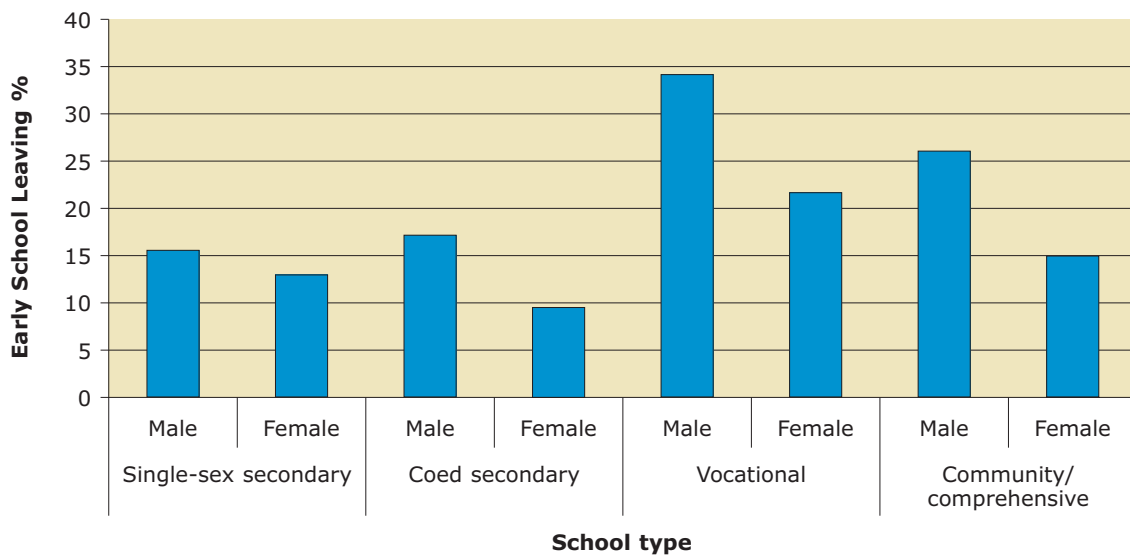
Figure 5.7: Early School Leaving by Hours of Employment in Junior Certificate Year



Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

most prevalent among students, particularly male students, in vocational schools, and least prevalent among those in secondary schools (Figure 5.8). Within each school type, male students have higher early school-leaving rates than their female counterparts. These sectoral differences are likely to reflect differences in the intake of students into the school (in terms of social class background and academic ability) rather than school effects per se.

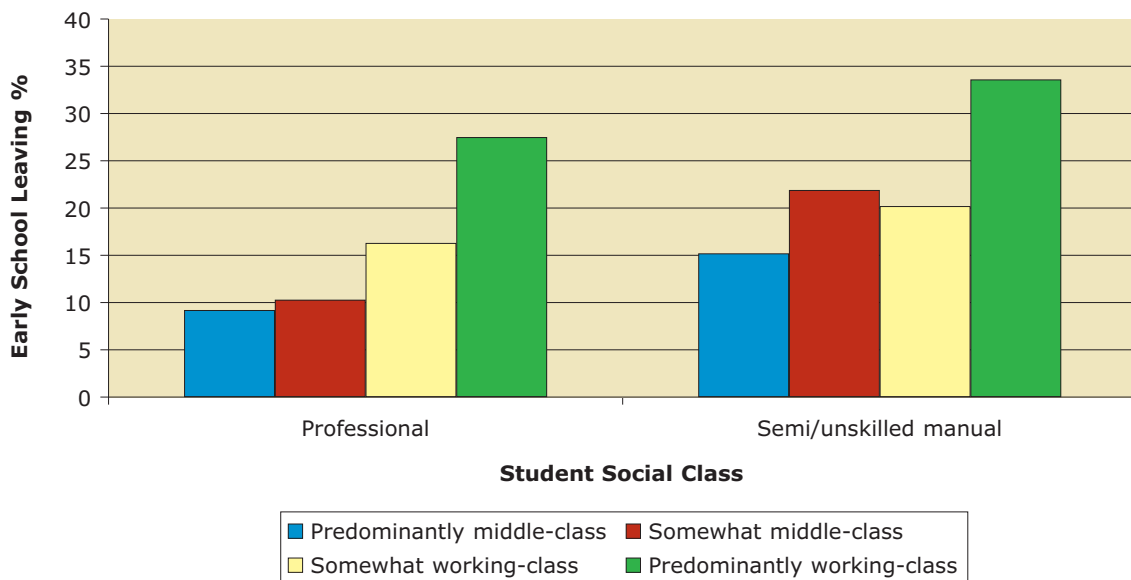
Figure 5.8: Early School Leaving by School Type



Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

Early school-leaving rates are indeed found to vary by the social class mix of students in the school; the prevalence of early school leaving is 11 per cent in predominantly middle-class schools compared with 31 per cent in predominantly working-class schools. This influence applies over and above a student's individual social class background; in other words, a student of any given social class background will be more likely to drop out of school in predominantly working-class schools than in other school contexts (Figure 5.9). Related to social class context, students are less likely to drop out of schools characterised by high teacher expectations.

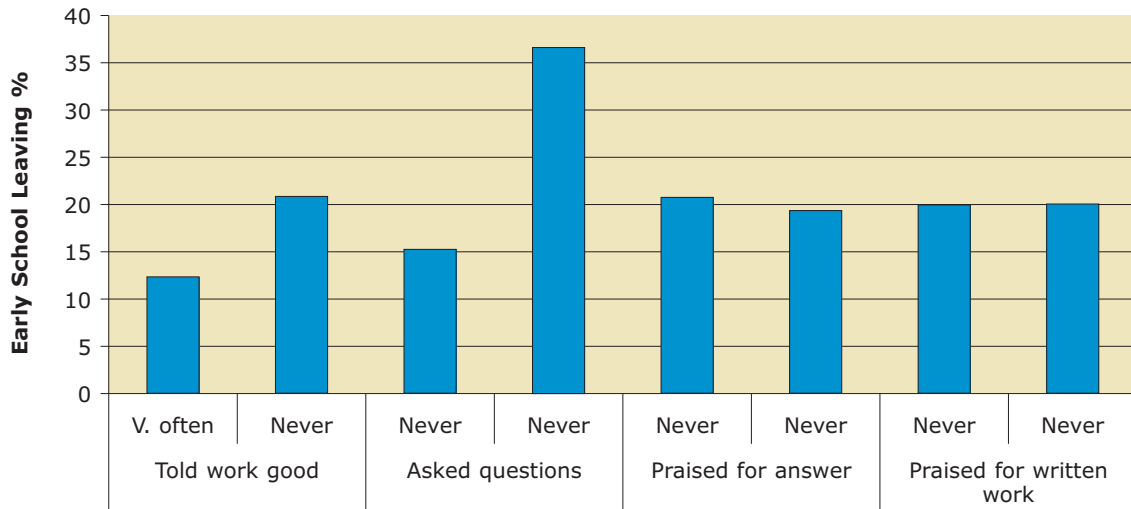
Figure 5.9: Early School Leaving by Social Class Context of the School



Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

While Chapter 4 found that the informal climate of the school, that is, the nature of interaction between teachers and students and among students themselves, is significantly associated with attendance rates, so too is such interaction related to student early school-leaving rates. Students who experience positive interaction with their teachers in their Junior Certificate year are less likely to leave school early. On closer inspection, the likelihood of early school leaving is found to relate to the frequency of being told that their work is good and of being asked questions in class (Figure 5.10).

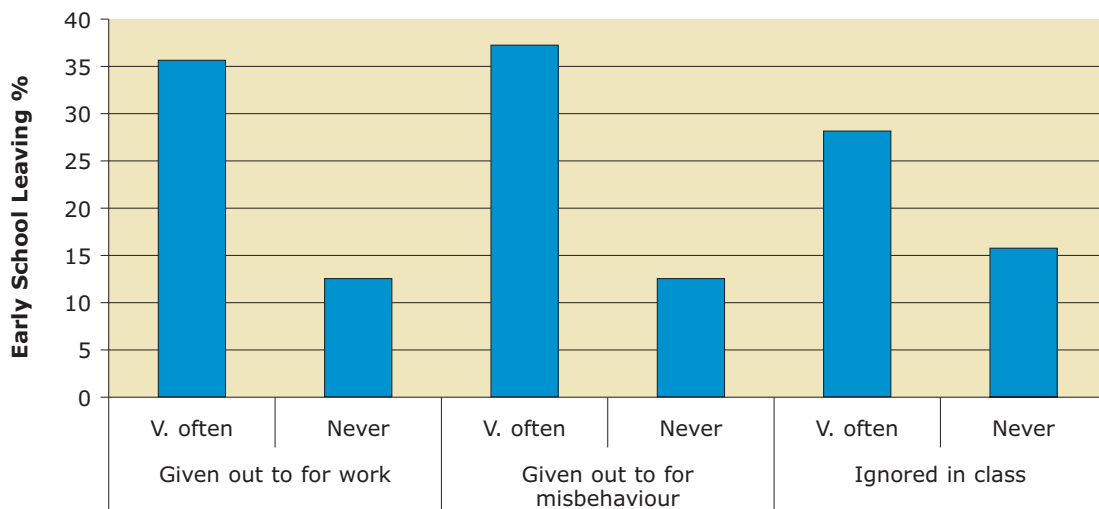
Figure 5.10: Early School Leaving by Frequency of Positive Teacher-Student Interaction



Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

In contrast, students who experience negative interaction with their teachers are more likely to drop out of school. Students who are frequently 'given out to' for not doing their work or for misbehaviour are significantly more likely to leave school early as are those who report being ignored by the teacher in class (Figure 5.11). Early school leaving was also related to perceived teacher approachability. Students who leave school early are also more likely to report that their school was easy-going, rather than strict, disorganised and unfriendly.

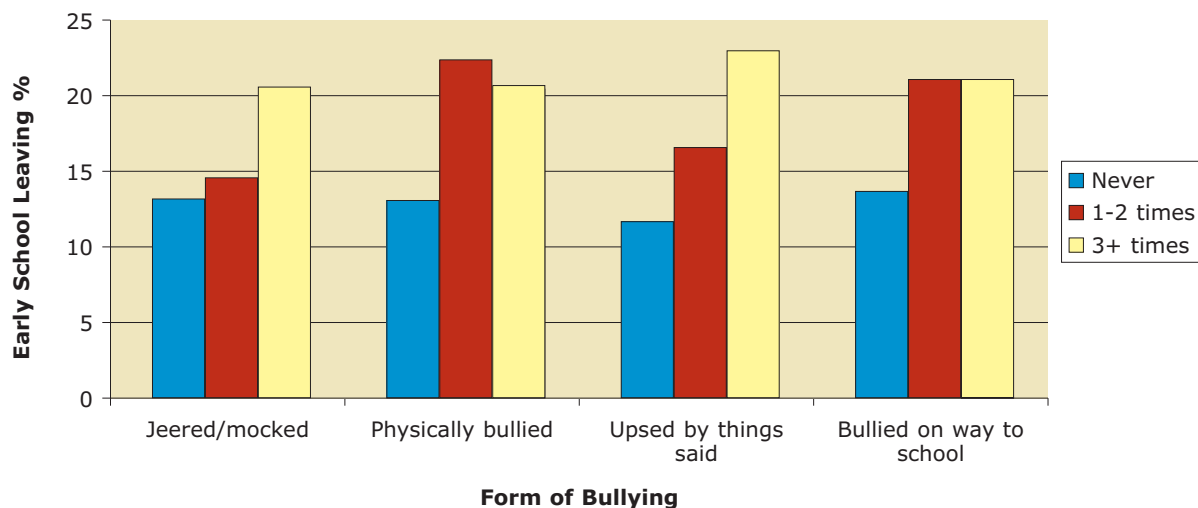
Figure 5.11: Early School Leaving by Frequency of Negative Student-Teacher Interaction



Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

While Chapter 3 found no significant relationship between experiencing bullying at school and attendance levels, the experience of bullying at school is found to be predictive of early school leaving among female students but makes no significant difference for male students. Figure 5.12 indicates that female students who have been frequently bullied in terms of being physically pushed, jeered or mocked, upset by things said by other students and being pestered on the way to school are significantly more likely to leave school early than students who have not experienced such behaviour.

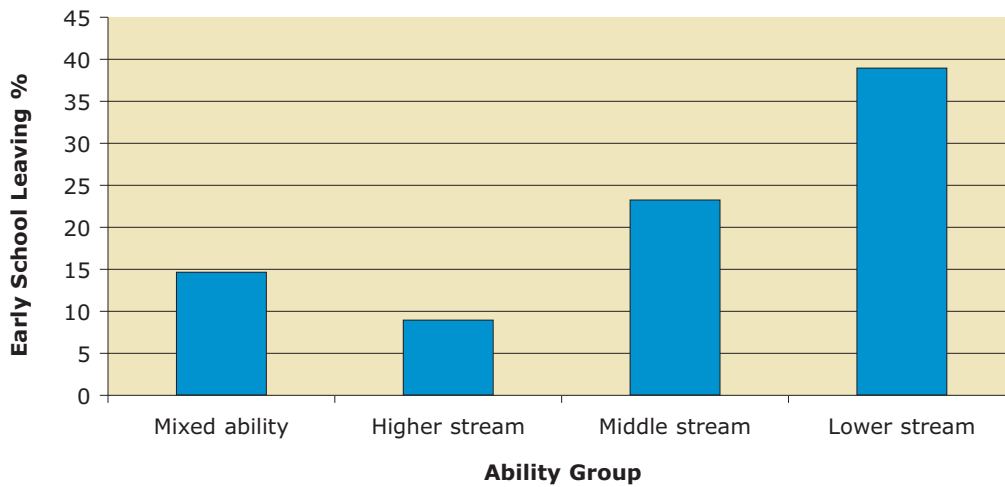
Figure 5.12: Early School Leaving by Frequency of Being Bullied (Female Students Only)



Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

As well as the informal climate, certain aspects of school organisation are found to impact on student retention. The form of ability grouping within the school, which was found to be related to attendance levels in Chapter 4, also has a significant relationship with patterns of early school leaving. Early school leaving is highest among those in lower stream classes and lowest among those in higher stream classes (Figure 5.13). This pattern is not merely due to the concentration of lower ability/performance students in lower stream classes since these classes have higher early school-leaving rates even if ability and Junior Certificate performance are taken into account.

Figure 5.13: Early School Leaving by Ability Grouping

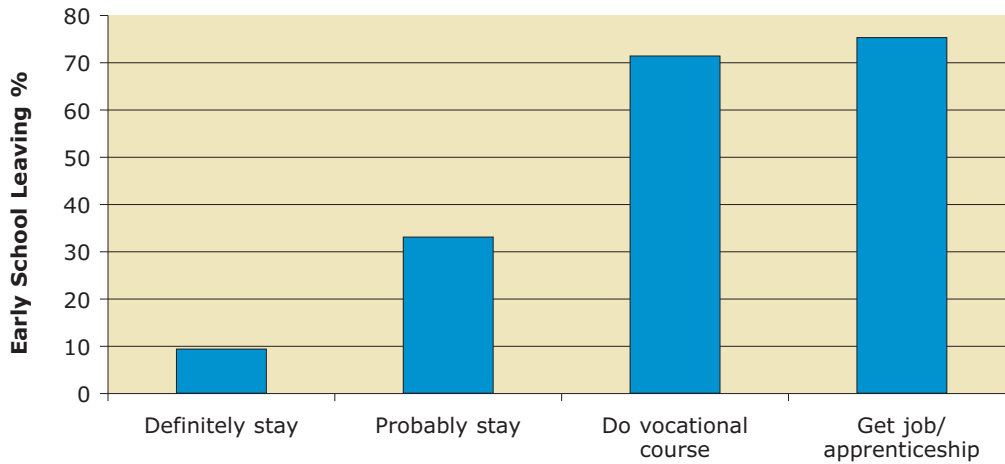


Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

5.2.5 Early School Leaving Intentions and Actual Early School Leaving

Some students may plan to drop out of school for a period before they actually do so. In the 1994 survey, students in their Junior Certificate year were asked about their plans following the examination. Over three-quarters (78 per cent) of students reported that they would definitely stay on for the Leaving Certificate; 14 per cent said they would 'probably' stay on at school; 5 per cent planned to look for a job or an apprenticeship; while 3 per cent planned to take some kind of vocational course. Figure 5.14 indicates that what students planned before the Junior Certificate examination is strongly predictive of what they actually did afterwards. Three-quarters of those who planned to get a job actually do leave school as do a high proportion (72 per cent) of those who plan to take a vocational course. In contrast, only a third of those who say they will 'probably' stay on to the Leaving Certificate subsequently leave along with a tenth of those who said they would 'definitely' stay (Figure 5.14). Thus, intentions are predictive of actual behaviour. However, it is worth noting that some students who had not planned to drop out of school do in fact do so and that some students who were not definite about staying appeared to change their minds and remain on in school.

Figure 5.14: Actual Early School Leaving by Intentions Prior to the Junior Certificate Examination

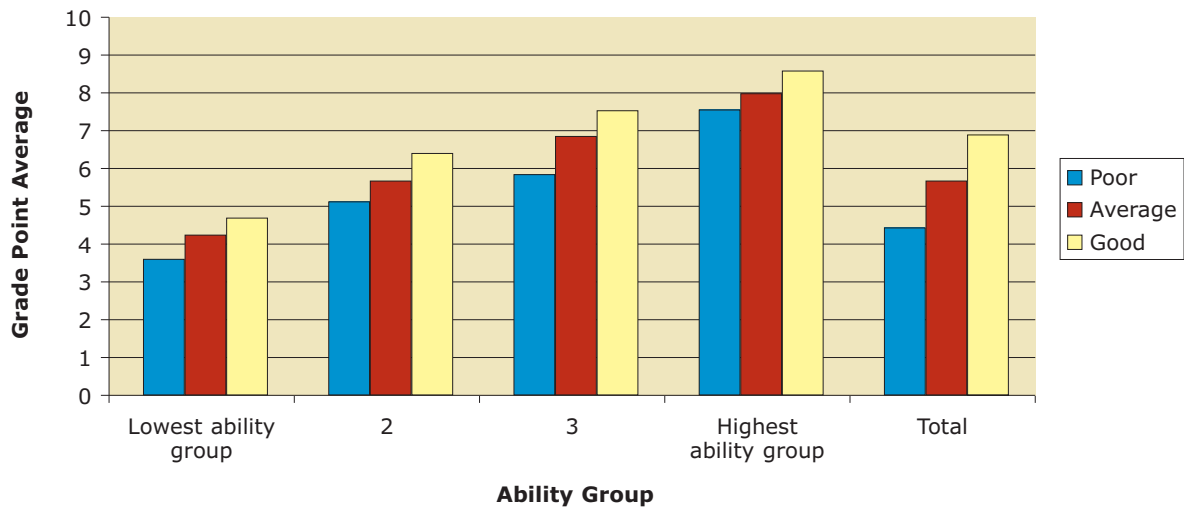


Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

5.3 Absenteeism, Poor Attendance and Examination Performance

Attendance is found to be significantly associated with examination performance at Junior Certificate level. For the purposes of these analyses, 'points' were assigned to each examination grade ranging from 0 ('E', 'F' or 'NG') to 10 ('A' on a higher level paper) and averaged over all subjects taken. Overall, students with good attendance records do more than 1.5 times better in the Junior Certificate examination than those with poor attendance records (Figure 5.15). However, as we have seen earlier, poor attenders tend to have lower ability test scores to start off with and this might be expected to account for some of the performance difference. On closer inspection, even controlling for prior ability, attendance makes a difference as to how students do in their examinations (Figure 5.15). The difference is somewhat less for those with the highest initial ability levels but is significant for all ability levels.

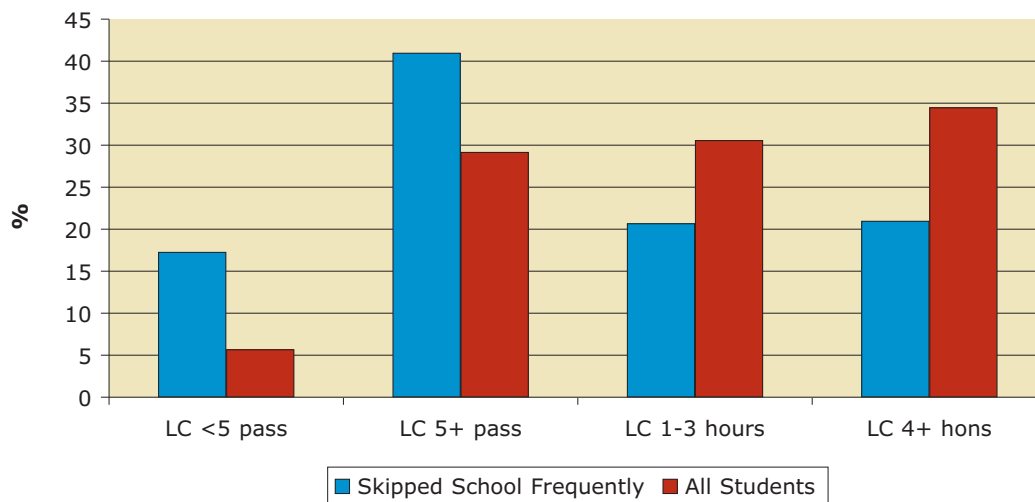
Figure 5.15: Junior Certificate Examination Performance by Attendance



Source: Schools' Database, 1994.

Drawing on the School Leavers' Survey, the incidence of serious poor attendance is closely associated with examination performance, particularly at Leaving Certificate level. Those who skip a considerable amount of school during their Leaving Certificate year are more highly represented among students who fail to secure five passes in their Leaving Certificate examination and are significantly under-represented among those who achieve one or more honours (Figure 5.16).

Figure 5.16: Leaving Certificate Examination Performance by Attendance



Source: School Leavers' Survey, 2002.

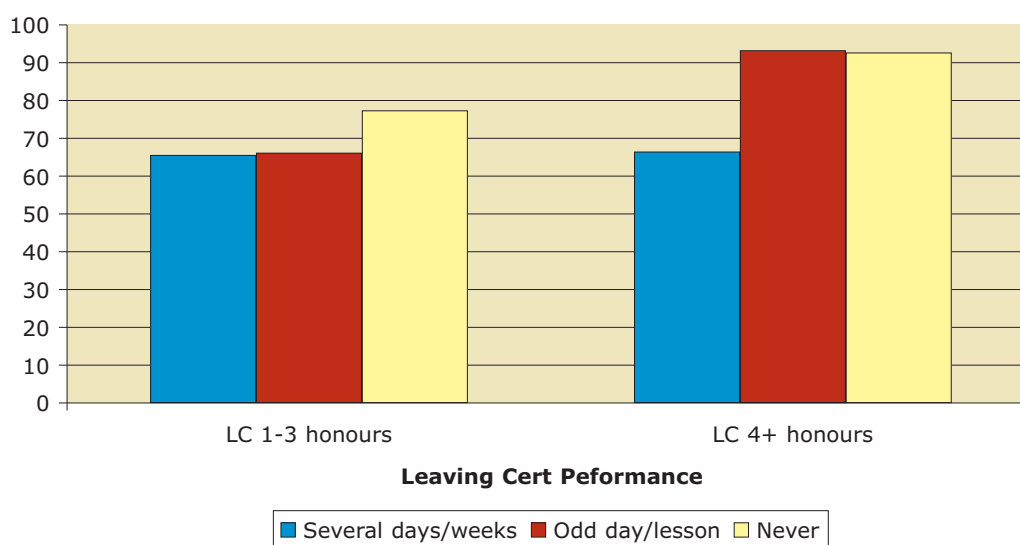
5.4 Poor attendance and Longer-Term Outcomes

The following section draws on students' retrospective accounts of poor attendance behaviour while at school (from the School Leavers' Survey 2002) and looks at the implications for their educational and labour market experiences. The analysis examines the relationship between attendance while at school and post-school educational participation and unemployment experience.

Participation in any form of post-school education or training varies significantly by attendance behaviour. Among young people who left school at Leaving Certificate level, over three-quarters (78 per cent) of those who never skipped school progressed to further study; this compares with over two-thirds (68 per cent) of those who missed the occasional lesson or school day and under half (47 per cent) of those who missed more school (those who missed several days or weeks at a time) went on to further education.

Even 'controlling' for examination performance and just looking at those getting honours in the Leaving Certificate examination, patterns of progression to further study closely mirror the prevalence of poor attendance during the Leaving Certificate year (Figure 5.17). Among those who achieved four or more honours in the Leaving Certificate, 67 per cent of those who skipped a considerable amount of school progressed to some form of further education or training, while 93 per cent of those who skipped school more occasionally and those who never missed school progressed to further study.

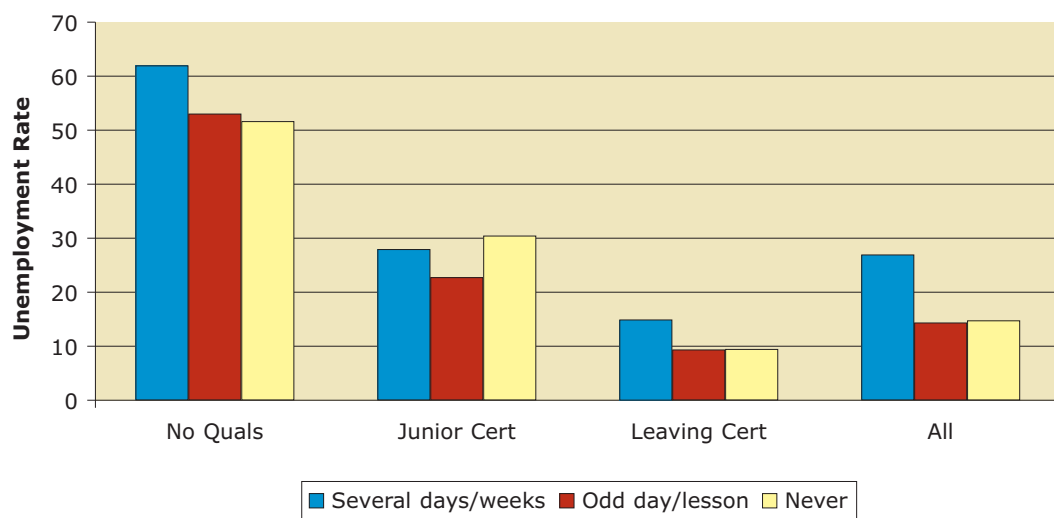
Figure 5.17: Progression to Further Study by Poor Attendance for 'Honours' Leaving Certificate students



Source: School Leavers' Survey, 2002.

As with educational outcomes, labour market experiences are also reflective of attendance behaviour while at school, with levels of unemployment higher among those who engaged in serious non-attendance, even within different educational attainment levels. While those who skipped a considerable amount of school have an unemployment rate of 27 per cent one year after leaving school, those who skipped school less frequently or not at all have an unemployment rate of less than 15 per cent (Figure 5.18).

Figure 5.18: Unemployment Rate One Year After Leaving School by Educational Attainment and 'Skipping' School




Note: Small numbers of Junior Certificate leavers make these results less reliable.
Source: School Leavers' Survey, 2002.

5.5 Summary

While earlier discussions have considered the school and student level correlates of poor attendance, this chapter has illustrated the detrimental impact of poor attendance while at school on a range of educational and labour market outcomes. The chapter illustrates an important price paid for poor attendance at school and points to the urgent need to address attendance issues as a means of preventing longer-term issues of social disadvantage and exclusion.

The analysis shows clear short-term effects of poor attendance while at school, with a strong relationship between attendance and subsequent early school leaving. Early school leaving tends to represent the culmination of a period of recurrent absenteeism and educational under-performance. Students who under-perform academically are more likely to leave school early as are those who are



persistently absent from school. These indicators would appear to provide a basis for policy intervention in order to prevent longer-term withdrawal from education.

Longer-term outcomes are also related to attendance behaviour while at school, so the effects last beyond the schooling period. Patterns of progression to further and higher education and experiences during the initial period in the labour market are all related to attendance behaviour signalling the importance of effectively addressing this behaviour as early as possible in the schooling career.

Chapter 6: Summary and Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

This report has provided valuable analysis of a number of existing educational databases on attendance-related issues, placing findings within the context of international research and policy developments. While significant gaps are evident in the availability of systematic information on these issues in Ireland, by re-analysing existing data this report provides fresh insights into the individual and school processes shaping absenteeism and poor attendance.

6.2 Summary

Individual Objective Characteristics

Attendance levels are clearly found to vary across individual characteristics such as gender, age and social background. The findings indicate that young men are somewhat more likely to 'skip school' than young women. In the context of policy concern about male underachievement and early school leaving, targeting poor attendance may provide a way of (partially) addressing these issues.

In terms of age, students who are older are more likely to have poorer attendance records. This may reflect greater disengagement among students who had been kept back a year or more earlier in their schooling career. However, many students who had left school after the Junior Certificate also reported that they had frequent periods of 'skipping' school. Hence, it appears that the process of disaffection and withdrawal from the educational system may well manifest itself shortly after the point of transition into post-primary education, if not earlier, pointing to the need for policy intervention to address poor attendance and school engagement at an early stage of post-primary, if not within primary, education.

Both attendance and absenteeism levels are associated with family background characteristics; students from professional families and/or those whose parents have third-level qualifications tend to have better attendance records and are less likely to skip classes. Furthermore, attendance patterns also show a strong association with membership of the Traveller Community. Given the association between absenteeism and subsequent educational performance (Chapter 5), these patterns are likely to contribute to and reinforce social class inequalities in educational outcomes and point to the urgent need to address attendance and other issues around educational disengagement early in the young person's schooling.

Individual Subjective Characteristics

It is unsurprising that students who have poor attendance rates generally report negative attitudes to school and teachers. However, these subjective characteristics of students give us an insight into how poor attenders view their school experience. The analysis has shown the negative nature of their relationship with many aspects of school life. Poor attenders not only dislike school but are significantly less likely to think school life 'is happy for them' and that it is in fact 'unfriendly'. They are more likely to think their teachers 'do not care about them' and that the school rules were 'unfair'.

The fact that, academically, poor attenders have lower rates of performance and do not have confidence in their academic ability is unsurprising when we see that less than two-thirds of those with poor attendance even think their school work is worth doing. This has obvious implications for the provision of extra assistance for students with academic difficulties. It also highlights the importance of creating an engaging learning environment for *all* students. The challenge is to engage students, particularly those with poor attendance records, with more innovative teaching and learning strategies and to create a greater sense of attachment and ownership of school life.

School Social Mix

Parental choice and school selection patterns mean that many schools have a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Such a concentration has an impact on attendance-related behaviour over and above the individual family background of students. Thus, schools serving more disadvantaged student populations tend to have significantly higher absenteeism rates than more middle-class schools. These differences appear to reflect, at least in part, differences in the expectational climates of schools. The strong differentiation between schools in their social composition indicates the potential benefits of targeting interventions towards schools with a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

School Organisation and Climate

Attendance rates are found to vary by school type and school size, as well as student mix as discussed. In particular, smaller post-primary schools are found to have higher levels of non-attendance. However, this pattern may well reflect differences in the accuracy of school records on student attendance rather than school size differences per se and points to the need for more accurate data on attendance, an issue which is discussed further in the next section.

Over and above the effects of the social mix of students in the school, it is clear that school organisation and process can make a difference to student attendance. The discussion indicates how policy and practice can in itself 'make a difference'. Clearly an environment of positive interaction with teachers and one where teachers have high expectations for students has a positive impact on student attendance. As a result, developing measures to promote a positive school climate and higher expectations for students should form a focus for future policy development since such initiatives are likely to facilitate student engagement and yield higher attendance levels.

Activities Outside School

School is not the only part of a student's life which impacts on their attendance levels. Activities outside school may act as a 'pull' away from a focus on school and study activities. Thus, students who have part-time jobs (particularly ones involving longer hours), more responsibilities within the home and an active social life are more likely than other students to have poor attendance records.

Impact of Non-attendance

In keeping with international research (see, for example, Farrington, 1980; Wagner *et al.*, 2004), poor attendance is found to be associated with both short- and longer-term educational and labour market outcomes among young people. Those with poor attendance records are much more likely to drop out of school before the Leaving Certificate, and, where they remain in school, they tend to do worse in their examinations than other students. Moreover, those who have engaged in sustained poor attendance while at school are less likely to progress to further study and experience greater difficulties in accessing paid employment after leaving school.

6.3 Further Research

While the analysis points to some interesting and important characteristics of individuals with poorer attendance records and schools which appear to be less effective in promoting attendance, the analysis also highlights the need for more detailed national data on attendance. Such information would include reliable and complete data from schools on levels of non-attendance among students and different forms of non-attendance (illness, holidays, 'skipping' school, etc.), some of which is currently collected from schools by the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), the body with statutory data collection responsibilities under the Education (Welfare) Act. However, it would also be important to collect additional

information from schools, within a dedicated study, on their policies regarding attendance and procedures for dealing with non-attendance and other discipline issues. Given the administrative burden that would be placed on schools if they were required to collect more detailed information on attendance annually, such information could be collected on a sampling basis. With a sampling approach, schools could be stratified to ensure a representative sample, surveyed on a rotational basis - perhaps every four years rather than annually. Alternatively, a baseline survey of a representative sample of schools could be undertaken, selected to represent all school types, regional locations and pupil composition. It would be of particular value to draw on schools from the NEWB school return database, to ensure that schools with relatively high and low attendance levels would be included.

Ideally, such data would also be linked with the post-primary pupil database, to allow a comprehensive analysis of the issues around attendance. Unfortunately the absence of a similar database at primary level means that analysis at primary level is potentially more limited, and requires a study encompassing more detailed data collection on primary schools.

The survey could encompass a number of areas of questioning, including:

- School composition and intake.
- School organisation and structure.
- The nature of learning support.
- The nature of school policies and practices around attendance and other disciplinary issues.
- The nature of support structures for students.
- School climate and interaction between students and teachers and among students themselves.
- Principals' views on student behaviour and attendance.
- Students' extra-curricular and out-of-school activities.
- Parental involvement and participation.

More detailed nationally-representative data would allow a number of important developments in our understanding and monitoring of attendance in Irish schools and allow more in-depth and comprehensive analysis of a number of areas and enhance our understanding of the issues:

1. It would provide a real potential to target students with serious levels of non-attendance (particularly absence which is not as a result of illness), who are likely to experience long-term difficulties in their schooling career.

2. It would allow analysis of changes over time in overall attendance levels. Currently, it is difficult to determine whether levels of attendance have changed significantly over a specific time-period.
3. It would assist schools in setting their own targets for achieving improvements in attendance.
4. It would allow the identification of schools with more innovative attendance strategies and procedures. It would also allow the identification of schools with varying 'success' in addressing non-attendance and follow-up case study work with such schools.
5. It would allow the analysis of the school and individual level factors impacting on attendance levels and the identification of the most effective ways of maximising student attendance and achievement.

In addition, the discussion points to a number of particular gaps in our knowledge of the factors shaping attendance, which require additional research attention and the collection of data specifically for the purposes of addressing these issues. These areas requiring further attention could be viewed as a series of steps in a longer-term programme of research on school attendance in Ireland. Such a programme of research would require a substantial investment from the State and could take the following structure.

As referred to earlier, little is known about the factors influencing poor attendance among primary school children. While absenteeism rates are lower in the primary sector, international research (Schagen *et al.*, 2004) suggests that some students may run into difficulties even at this early stage and that these patterns have longer-term consequences. Hence, research attention needs to focus, in the first instance, on the attendance behaviour of students in the primary sector, on the experiences of schools (with varying attendance levels) and the factors impacting on this. The first and primary requirement is a baseline survey of a representative sample of primary schools, to be completed by school principals. Such a survey would include detailed information on school level policies and practices around student absenteeism and other disciplinary issues, the prevalence of disciplinary and attendance problems and measures of student composition and intake.

Findings from the survey analysis could allow the identification of schools for further case study work on a range of issues. For example, little is known about the extent to which practices at the individual school level (such as the monitoring of absenteeism, school rules regarding poor attendance, and established pastoral care for students) serve to reduce the incidence of poor attendance. Are there any

examples of good practice which may inform policy in other schools? While national data could serve to identify schools with more innovative strategies in this regard, follow-up case-study analysis could examine the extent to which varying strategies impact on attendance and what strategies could be considered most effective in devising national guidelines for attendance practices for schools.

Survey data and follow-up case study analysis with school personnel and students themselves could also allow more consideration to be given to the boundaries between different forms of non-attendance as this has implications for the nature of appropriate interventions. To what extent are young people staying away from school with parental permission as opposed to skipping class on their own initiative? As mentioned above, NEWB data requested from primary and post-primary schools needs to address the nature of non-attendance as well as overall levels of attendance. While all schools may well have baseline levels of non-attendance through illness, for example, it is likely that non-attendance through skipping school without parental consent, for example, may be far more variable across schools. Certainly, non-attendance through deliberate skipping school could well be considered more serious for the educational progress of the individual and an issue which school and national authorities need specific strategies and programmes to address.

Once a national survey has been undertaken, it may be possible to develop a longitudinal series of data, returning to schools a number of years later to obtain follow-up data. While such follow-up data would allow the analysis of changes in attendance patterns across schools and the factors associated with improvements, for example, it would also allow researchers to more adequately address the causal processes. While this report provides unique and valuable insights into attendance issues in Irish schools, most of the existing information sources make it difficult to disentangle the causal processes involved in shaping non-attendance. For example, is poor attendance an 'acting out' of an underlying disaffection with school or does non-attendance in itself further alienate students from the school environment (by making it difficult to catch up with schoolwork or resulting in more negative interaction with teachers)? Ideally, longitudinal data, collected at a number of time-points, would be required to accurately disentangle such causal processes.

Further research could also examine attendance issues for specific sub-sets of students. None of the data available to date has allowed us to explore attendance issues for students with special educational needs, be they physical needs,

psychological, emotional or academic. Attendance levels among young people with special educational needs should be explored to assess the extent to which lack of appropriate support may play a part in school disaffection. Greater understanding of attendance issues for these students could be obtained by undertaking a dedicated survey of schools catering for such students, combined with follow-up work with students with special educational needs to explore their experiences and views.

Finally, further research needs to examine the broader home-school relationship, particularly for students with poor attendance behaviour. In particular, such research should consider how schools can best promote a positive and open relationship with parents and one in which parents and schools work together to ensure the attendance of young people. This would require additional information from parents, as well as from schools, to explore their attitudes and experiences around attendance.

6.4 Attendance Policies in Schools

Absenteeism is one of the strongest factors associated with early school leaving (Morgan, 1998), as this study has also shown. The consequences of poor attendance are serious: Chapter 5 has shown the detrimental impact of poor attendance while at school on a range of educational and labour market outcomes. Poor attendance is costly to the State and to the individuals involved, resulting in limited life-chances for the latter - put most simply, school absence is expensive. Research shows that attendance is a serious problem for a significant minority of Irish primary and post-primary students, in particular in areas of social and economic disadvantage. Considering that early patterns of non-attendance are habit forming, there is a need to have a clear policy in place at both primary and post-primary level in order to highlight the importance of the issue and provide guidance on school attendance. The lack of such policy may result in difficulties in understanding the importance of the issue by parents as well as teachers and may also result in inconsistencies in addressing individual cases of poor attendance (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2004). Attendance policies can help to foster self-discipline in students; to dictate appropriate behaviour and determine consequences for actions (Railsback, 2004). Such policies should be communicated to all parties and implemented consistently across schools and individuals.

6.5 Policy Recommendations Arising from the Study

The objective, subjective, and school characteristics associated with higher levels of absenteeism build a picture of the types of students who are at risk of poor attendance. There are many broader socio-economic factors shaping attendance in school, which to a large extent are outside the influence of the educational system. Broader social and economic policy could play a role in reducing serious levels of disadvantage. However, there are also many things that can be done at the school level to help tackle the problem of poor attendance. Schools themselves and the diversity of organisations working with schools, particularly the NEWB and the Department of Education and Science, should promote the development of these practices and policies in schools, as well as providing a statutory framework for their provision where relevant.

- The report shows the negative nature of the school experience for those with poor attendance. Students' withdrawal from school appears to reflect a disaffection with school life. From a policy perspective, this is an interesting finding since student attitudes to school have been found to reflect school climate as well as personal characteristics. Thus, a more positive school climate, especially in terms of creating a happy, supportive, interesting learning environment and promoting positive interaction with teachers is likely to have positive benefits in terms of student attendance and retention.
- The nature of the curriculum and the provision of a broad curriculum may also play a role in addressing non-attendance. In particular, access to subjects with a practical orientation may help to engage students who are less academically oriented (see Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004; Darmody and Smyth, 2005).
- It is important to note that students who do not rate themselves highly academically and do not have confidence in their academic ability are more likely to have poor attendance. The provision of extra assistance for these students to raise their confidence in their abilities may not only lead to better academic outcomes, but also better attendance rates.
- The fact that schools serving a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience particular difficulties with attendance indicates the potential for targeting policy initiatives towards such schools.
- School climate is also an important issue in tackling poor school attendance. Students' attendance levels appear to be associated with the nature of their interaction with their teachers and the extent to which teachers have high expectations for them. As a result, developing measures to promote a positive school climate and higher expectations for students should form a focus for future policy development since such initiatives are likely to facilitate student engagement and yield higher attendance levels. Schools

should be encouraged to promote student involvement in the school at an informal level, through sports and other extracurricular activities, and at a formal level through student councils or other consultative structures.

- This report has also found that early school leaving tends to represent the culmination of a period of recurrent absenteeism and educational underperformance. Students who underperform academically are more likely to leave school early as are those who are persistently absent from school. These indicators would appear to provide a basis for policy intervention in order to prevent longer-term withdrawal from education.

In conclusion, targeting disadvantaged schools; engaging students in school life; giving more support to students who do not have confidence in their academic abilities; promoting a positive school climate; improving relationships between students and teachers may all be positive moves towards addressing poor attendance. Furthermore, it is important to identify students with high levels of absenteeism as 'at risk' of early school leaving and target resources at re-engaging these students.

Ultimately going forward greater attention needs to be paid to preventative measures given the serious price paid for the individual, and society at large, for poor attendance while at school. There is clear need for further research and greater resources to services, such as those of the NEWB, which are addressing attendance issues in Irish schools.

Over and above these issues, the NEWB has a major role to play in highlighting the need for regular school attendance. It has the statutory authority to ensure that every child receives education and has a key role in addressing attendance. The NEWB is best placed to become the primary source of expertise on the issue of attendance and the overarching authority providing support to schools in maximising their attendance levels. This can be achieved through a strategic approach to the issue, as envisaged in the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 by:

- Monitoring the **extent of poor attendance** with a view to reducing the larger problem of early school leaving and addressing the issue of educational disadvantage. This can be achieved by maximising and maintaining co-operation and compliance from primary and post-primary schools in providing regular, comprehensive and accurate data on attendance.¹³

¹³ In order to reduce the time involved in collating such data, electronic recording devices could be introduced in schools. The NEWB should ensure schools are sufficiently aware of the format in which the information is recorded to ensure consistency.

- Investigating the **complex causes behind poor attendance** by commissioning comprehensive research in the area to inform policy, as discussed in the previous section.
- Offering **information and guidance to schools and families** about how to best address the issue of attendance. In addition, the NEWB can assist schools in devising their attendance policies; policies that are crucial in combating poor attendance and early school leaving. In order to ensure this, the NEWB needs to establish close links with schools. The resources and staffing levels required for such work are of paramount importance.
- **Coordinating and evaluating different measures** currently in place for tackling poor attendance and broader issues of educational disadvantage and underperformance (School Completion Programme; Junior Certificate School Programme; LCA; Home-School-Community Liaison, etc.). To date, little is known about the efficiency and impact of these initiatives on attendance - the NEWB would be well-placed to liaise with these programmes and initiatives, with a view to maximising all efforts (which are shown to be effective) working to promote participation and success for *all* students in schools.
- **Disseminating information and data** on poor attendance in order to inform the public of the importance of the issue in terms of the lifelong outcomes of poor attendance and early school leaving. If parents were fully cognisant of the price paid for poor attendance, they may well be more effective in ensuring the regular attendance of their child.
- Establishing and developing **partnerships with other organisations**, working in the area of educational disadvantage in particular, in order to more efficiently address poor attendance, early school leaving and educational disadvantage.
- Specifically addressing serious non-attendance and **reinforcing compliance with legislation around school attendance**. Research evidence shows that incidents of persistent poor attendance may result in delinquent and criminal behaviour in young people. In order to ensure compliance, the NEWB needs to forge close links with social services and law enforcement agencies. Ultimately, there needs to be adequate resources on the ground for the NEWB to work with all individuals with poor patterns of attendance and ensure a tailored and multidimensional programme of response to ensure their attendance and success at school.

Considering the complex nature of poor attendance, as outlined in this report, and the importance of this issue for the individual, as well as society, a multi-layered response involving comprehensive research into the issue of attendance, assistance to schools in maximising their attendance levels, comprehensive support to individuals in difficulty, and assistance to organisations working in the area of educational disadvantage will be essential in order to maximise attendance in Irish schools.

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