



National Council for Curriculum and Assessment  
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta

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# Towards a curriculum framework for children detention schools, special care units and high support units

## Report on a survey of students

March 2007

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# 1. Introduction

## Background

The Department of Education and Science is in the process of developing an Education Strategy for children in detention and in special or high support care. In this context, the NCCA was requested by the Department to generate a framework for and guidelines on curriculum and assessment provision in Children Detention Schools and High Support and Special Care Units. The framework and guidelines are in the process of being generated in collaboration with the schools and units involved.

## The Rationale

In order to establish the current realities for teaching and learning in these settings two questionnaires were developed to survey the response of students and teachers to these issues. The data gathered will be used to contribute to further discussion and consultation with the stakeholders on issues of curriculum provision. The design of the questionnaires was based around discussions which took place with teachers/principals/students and took into consideration curriculum documentation together with the spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Education Act (1998), the goals of the National Children's Strategy (2000) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004). The articles, resolutions and sections based within the various Acts and strategies highlight the responsibility of facilitating the expression of children's views on matters which interest or concern them and identify the rights, roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders in the provision of an "appropriate" education for all.

*"States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child".*

*(Article 12; Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)*

Empowering students to be active participants in policy development on matters which affect them is a frequently used methodology of the NCCA, the resulting valuable data

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being used to inform the design, refinement, and evaluation of curriculum interventions. This is clearly observable in a most recent publication *Pathways through the Junior Cycle the experiences of second year students (2006)*, a longitudinal study of student's experiences of curriculum in the first three years of their post-primary schooling; commissioned by the NCCA and carried out by the Educational Policy Research Centre of the ESRI. The NCCA's methodology also clearly reflects the goals of The National Children's Strategy (2000)

*Children's lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services....The strategy recognises that all children have a basic range of needs and that some children have additional needs.*

*(National Children's Strategy (2000))*

Some of the provisions of the EPSEN Act 2004 also inform the rationale for the surveys. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders ...

*...to assist children with special educational needs to leave school with the skills necessary to participate in the social and economic activities of society and live independent lives to the best of their capacity.*

*(EPSEN Act; 2004)*

Preparation and planning for the provision of an Education Plan for each student with Special Educational Needs as outlined in the EPSEN Act 2004, where learning goals in a timeframe, teaching strategies, resources and the supports necessary to achieve those goals must be specified, were considered.

Questions on many of these issues have been posed in both surveys, the response to which will inform future debate and consultation on the design of a flexible and enabling curriculum framework. Having this rationale at the initial stage of the consultation process will help focus minds on developing a curriculum framework to be grounded in the realities, challenges and the complexities of providing a student centred education service in these settings.

## **The Context**

### ***High Support Units***

There are currently thirteen High Support Units in the country. The Health Authorities take responsibility for the care of this category of child while the Department of Education and Science have responsibility to provide education services for the young people in the special schools attached to these units. The ages of the young people generally admitted to High Support can range from 9 to 17 years. High Support Care is for children with severe emotional and behavioural problems, whose presenting difficulties need a more specialised service than foster care or mainstream residential care can provide.

The service provides opportunity for additional support to children, via higher staff ratios and higher levels of therapeutic input. It is less restrictive than secure provision. High Support Units are an interim service. The school places are reserved for children accepted into the units by the admission committee. High Support Special Schools require that a prospective student's details be supplied to the school prior to enrolment.

Individualised programmes offered to children are based on the child's assessed needs, the overriding backdrop being that the child will return to mainstream community care or home. Enrolment is therefore short term and is understood to be anything from two to twenty four months in duration. Because of the short stay it is important that links are made with the past school to determine details of the student's studies to date so as to ensure that the student does not lose out when they return there. High Support Care is also seen as a 'Step Down' facility where children who are deemed to be progressing well (lower risk) in the more secure environment of a Special Care Unit can be moved to a less restrictive environment with continuing high support care.

When children are being admitted to high support care from a mainstream situation or being 'stepped down' from more secure care, they may be given the opportunity to gradually phase in their transition to high support by spending a day or an "overnight" at the unit. This way they gradually get to experience high support care and the

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facilities available to them in terms of care and education. Children in High Support Units are not legally detained.

### **Special Care Units**

Special Care Units accommodate children who are the subject of special care orders granted by the High Court. These orders allow the Health Board to restrict the young person's liberty for their own safety and welfare. Such orders are only granted by the courts where there is a substantial risk to the child's health, safety, development or welfare. Special Care Orders granted by a court are seen as a measure of last resort. They are used only when all other care and protection options have been exhausted. According to a report published by the Residential Services Board in May 2005, the principal reasons for placement in a special care unit were; unauthorised absences, substance abuse, sexual activity, sexual abuse and physical abuse. The children in Special Care are not convicted of any offences.

There are currently three Special Care Units in the country; Ballydowd in Palmerstown, Glean Alainn (girls) in Cork, and Coovagh House in Limerick. The Health Authorities take responsibility for the care of this category of child while the Department of Education and Science has responsibility to provide education services for the young people in the special schools attached to these units.

### ***Children Detention Schools***

These schools provide residential care, education and rehabilitation for children, generally up to the age of 16 who are either remanded or committed by the High Court. Children convicted of offences may be committed to the schools for periods ranging from one to four years. Children on charges before the courts may be remanded in custody in the schools, either on remand only or on remand for assessment. The period of remand can range from days to weeks.

There are five Detention Schools for young offenders in the country; three schools at Lusk in Dublin (Oberstown girls/boys and Trinity House), Finglas child and adolescent centre in Dublin, and St. Josephs in Clonmel. The schools at present have an

operational capacity of 115 boys and 15 girls. The Department of Education and Science has responsibility for the care and education of children in the detention schools. There are provisions to affect the transfer of responsibility for the detention of young offenders to the new Youth Justice Service when the amendments to the Children's Act 2001 come into force. The Department of Education and Science is to retain responsibility for the provision of education services in the detention schools and to provide for a change in the way education is to be delivered with a move away from schooling currently administered by the Primary School model, to delivery by the relevant VEC.

### **Typical Education Provision**

The schools are generally designated as special national schools. They not only provide education but also play a large part in the rehabilitation process. The educational background of many of the students can be characterised by a failure to benefit from conventional mainstream schooling. The vast majority are not only underachieving but may have been excluded or excluded themselves from the mainstream school system for several years. Teachers and care staff work closely together to create a positive environment in which the young person can fulfil their potential socially emotionally and academically. Students in these schools typically present with significant difficulties in the areas of basic literacy and numeracy, and by attendant behavioural problems. The schools have generated considerable expertise, based on experience, of what works best for the students in question. Typically this consists of

- comprehensive educational assessment
- generation of individual care and education plans
- intensive literacy and numeracy programmes
- aspects of the primary curriculum
- some Junior Certificate subjects
- a number of FETAC modules
- some Leaving Certificate subjects.

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## 2. Student Survey Findings

### The Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open response questions on aspects of the teaching and learning experienced by students. Part 1 of the questionnaire profiled the respondents and posed questions on their experiences of schooling before they entered detention/high support or special care. Part 2 collected responses on their experiences of schooling while in detention or care. The questionnaire was made available in three formats.

1. Hard Copies of the questionnaire were distributed to each school.
2. The questionnaire was available for completion online using an online survey tool – ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com))
3. The questionnaire was e-mailed to each school.

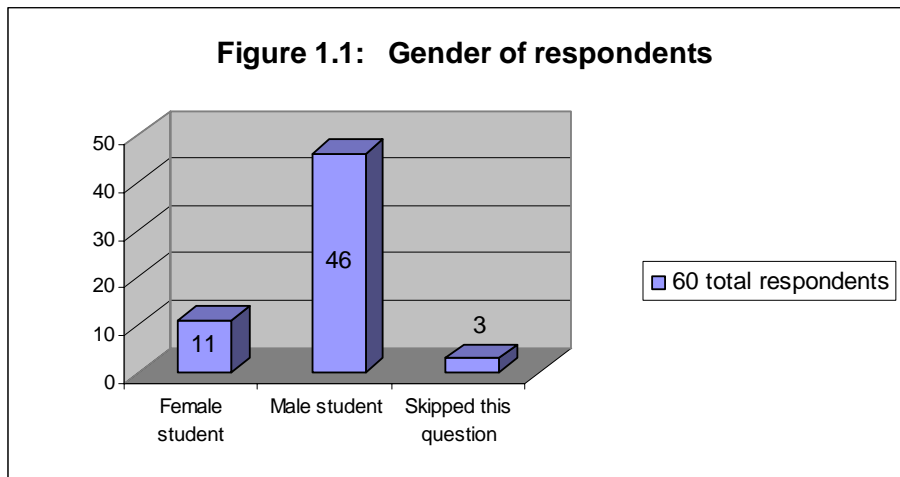
In total, 60 completed questionnaires were received. This was a very high response rate when one considers that only 132 children were in detention/care at the time of the survey. This response rate of 45.45% ensures a 95% confidence level.

On receipt of completed hard copies of the questionnaire, the data was inputted to the online survey tool. This tool separated the data into both qualitative and quantitative types. The quantitative data was analysed by the survey tool and the qualitative responses listed which allowed for the easy identification of themes within the data.

### Profile of respondents

#### *Gender*

Figure 1.1 shows the number of boys and girls who responded to the survey. The higher number of boys to girls is reflective of the proportion of boys to girls presently in detention and care. At the time of the survey there were 105 boys and 27 girls on the roll of the schools and taking part in education. Forty six boys and 11 girls responded to the survey. This sample offers a valid representation of the population of boys and girls in detention/care.



***Age and gender***

Figure 1.2 shows that the age range of the students who responded was from 9 to 17 years. The average age was 14.5 years. The girls (14.45 years) were slightly older than the boys (14.28 years). Twenty three students were 14 years or younger with two students under 12 years, as against 35 students who were 15 years and over. Thirty-one percent of students indicated they were 13 years of age when they first entered the detention/high support/ or special care setting, with 18% reporting that they were less than 12 years old at the time.

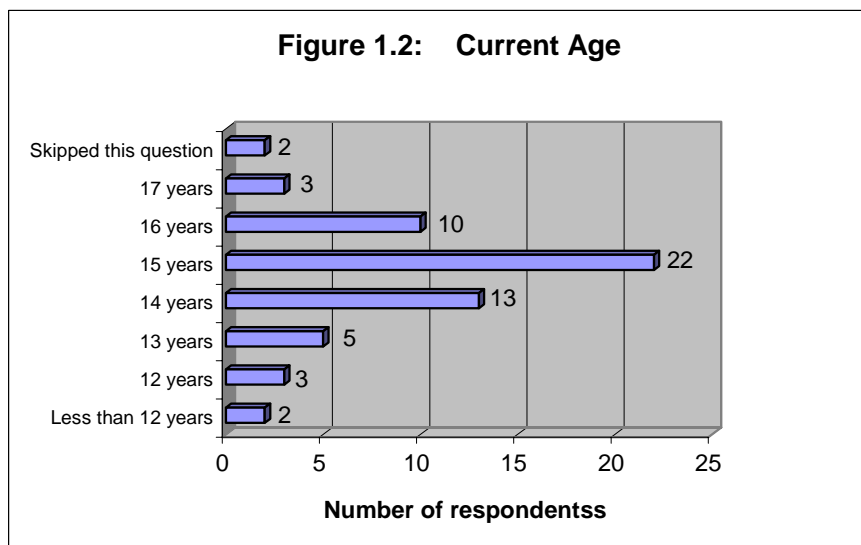
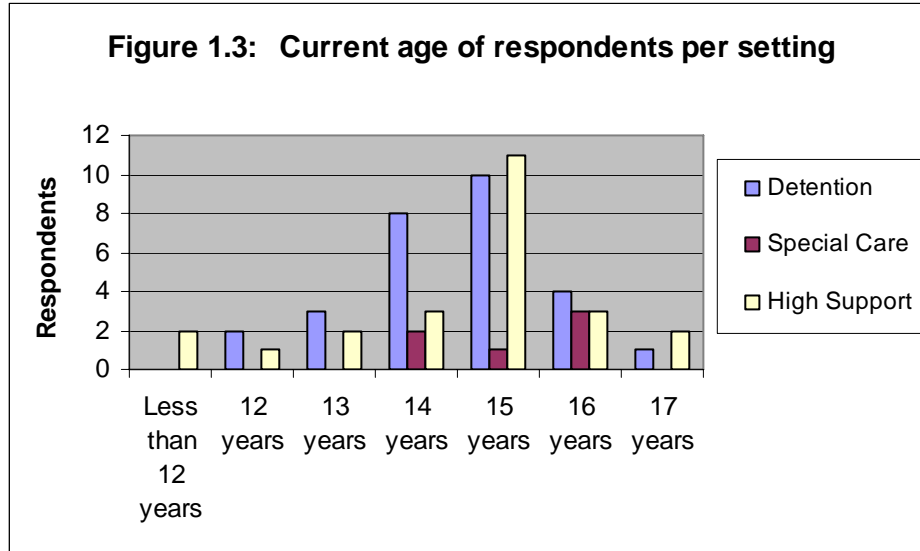


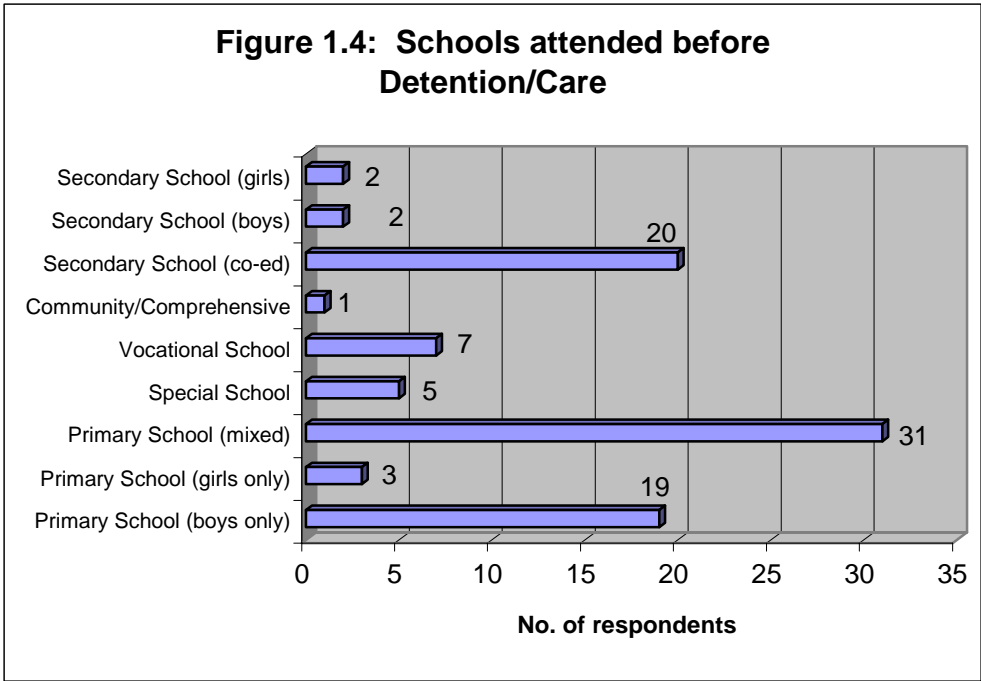
Figure 1.3 shows the current age range of respondents when examined in the context of the three school settings.



## Previous Experiences of Mainstream School

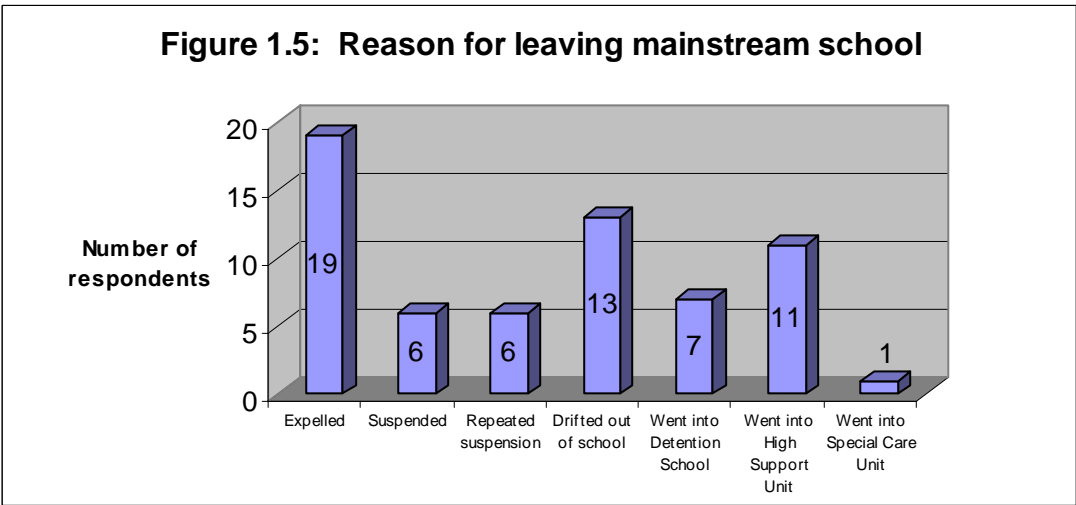
### Schools attended

When asked to indicate the type of schools attended before entering detention/care (Fig.1.4) four students reported attending more than one category of primary school with only one student indicating attendance at more than one category of post-primary school. Two girls reported attending a girl's only secondary school. There were three responses for attendance at a primary school (girls) with only one student having attended a post-primary (community/comprehensive). Primary school (mixed) and secondary school (co-ed) provided the highest response in terms of first and second level schools attended before entering a detention or care setting for the first time.



**Reasons for leaving mainstream school**

Figure 1.5 shows that being expelled (19) and suspension and repeated suspension (12) were the main reasons students gave for leaving their mainstream school were. Twenty two point four percent (13) indicated that they simply drifted out of school with eleven respondents saying they were admitted to a high support unit. Seven students reported being admitted to a child detention school with one student indicating attendance at a special care unit.



## **Feelings / experiences of previous mainstream schooling**

When asked for their feelings about their previous mainstream school, a majority of students (35) reported that they hated school as against ten students who indicated that they either loved or liked school. Ten students thought school was “ok”.

Twenty-two students could not recall any positive experience they had in a class in mainstream school. The remaining positive responses centred around five main themes.

## **Positive experiences in class at mainstream school**

### ***Team sports / PE / School trips - (13)***

*e.g., When I was in transition year we went to this place in Wicklow / Baltinglass. Learning all different experiences like how to do stuff like swimming... All sorts of activities.*

*.... Football and games.... Treasure hunt on sports day, all the stuff we learned during the year were clues*

### ***Practical Subjects (Art, Home Economics, Metal/Woodwork) - (13)***

*e.g., Doing woodwork and metalwork projects ... ..I liked making stuff .....*  
*I was taken out of class to do art.... We had a French day and cooked a French meal*

### ***Friends – (6)***

*e.g., I was in the same class as family (extended) members.....Enjoyed messing with friends...Meeting friends*

### ***Specific Subjects – (5)***

*e.g., I liked mathematics class..... I felt good when I completed FETAC in mathematics*  
*I liked superspell on the computer in my last school*

### ***Teachers (helpful / nice) – (6)***

*e.g., When I got a trophy off the principal.... When teacher was nice to me...*  
*I had a nice business studies teacher*

One student equated examinations or certification with a positive experience in a previous mainstream school. Thirty percent of students could not recall any positive experiences and ten respondents skipped the question.

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### **Negative experiences in mainstream school**

The majority of student statements relating to negative experiences of previous mainstream school centred on both the teachers attitudes/actions towards them (27) and the students feelings when suspended or expelled (14). Three students said they had no negative experience of previous mainstream school and eleven of those who responded to the questionnaire skipped this question. Issues of bullying by peers accounted for seven of the responses. Ten students offered subject related responses as a negative experience of previous schooling.

*e.g.*

*I didn't like being suspended ..... Fighting in classrooms with teachers being told to go to the back of the class ....*

*A teacher told me I would never pass a test and would be on the dole for the rest of my life so then I left school...*

*Teacher used to shout and give out .... Racism was there for me .... There were lots of bullies ....*

*The school day was too long ... Too much work ... I don't like thinking about my last school I was in because it upsets me*

### **Experiences of Schooling in Child Detention Schools, High Support Units and Special Care Units**

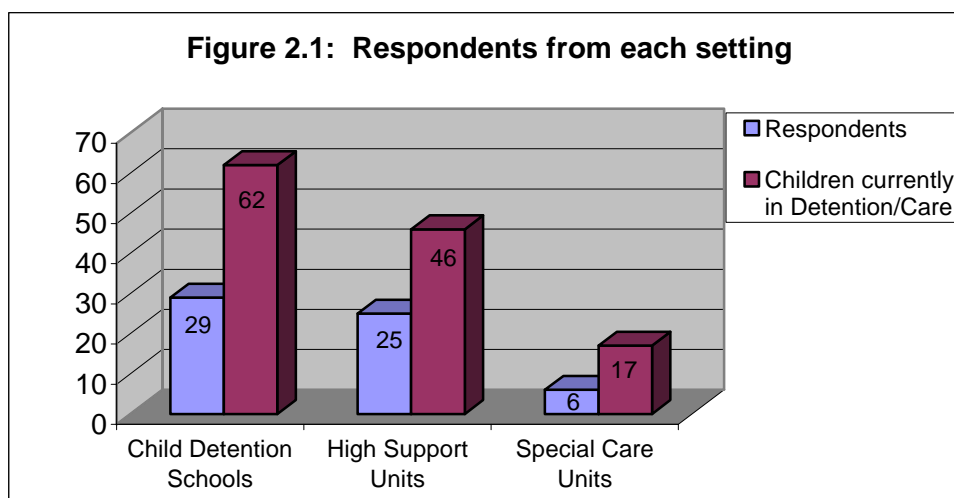
The second part of the questionnaire sought responses from students on their experiences of the education provision in their current and previous care or detention placements.

#### **Current placement of respondents**

From Figure 2.1 it is clear that for many students, their time spent in detention /care is unlikely to consist of placement in a single setting. Many respondents to this survey were placed in high support/special care because their family life and subsequent placement in foster and mainstream residential care had broken down. High support (residential or day) care is usually the next step when mainstream care is not appropriate to meet the needs of the children. If, when they are in high support care, the child is progressing well on their care/education plan then they can be placed back

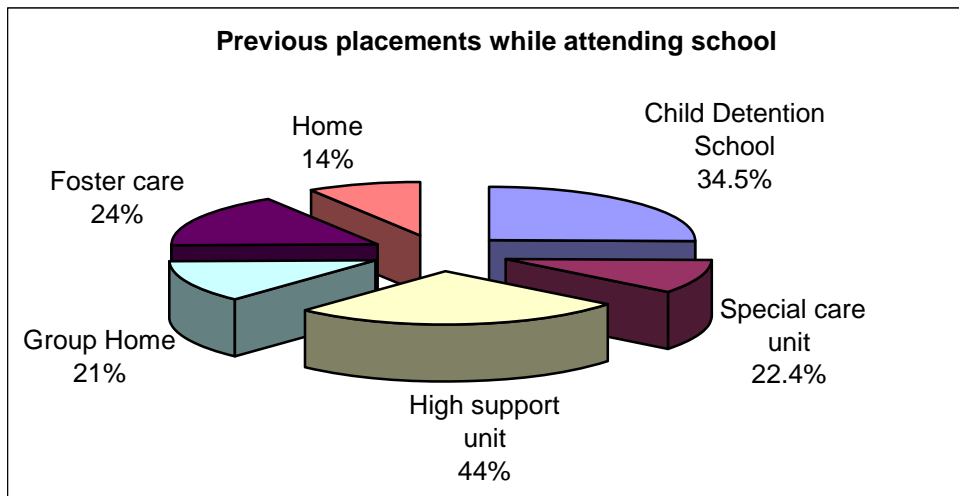
with their own family, a foster family or mainstream residential care (community). If however they continue to present with high risk behavioural/ emotional difficulties they may be admitted (stepped up) to a special care unit which is more secure and used as a last resort. Time spent in special care is intended to be short term in nature (typically 3-6 months but in practice may be longer) the intention being to step the child back down to high support and/or back out to the community (mainstream residential, foster care, own family) with the involvement of the probation service/social worker in the child's "exit strategy".

Children who are placed in a detention school by the High Court may move between any of the five detention centres during that time. They are highly unlikely to move to a special care/high support unit because of the nature of their offences and the fact that children in special/high support care have not committed an offence to warrant placement there. In a similar way, children in special care/high support units, under normal circumstances are not moved to a detention setting.



### Previous placements while attending school

Many of the students offered multiple previous placement responses, meaning that they had been moving around a loop consisting of — home — care — detention, while they attended school (Fig.2.2). Twenty respondents spent time in a child detention school, 21 in a high support unit and 13 students in a special care unit, prior to their current placement. The majority of respondents reported moving between home, mainstream care, high support and special care units.

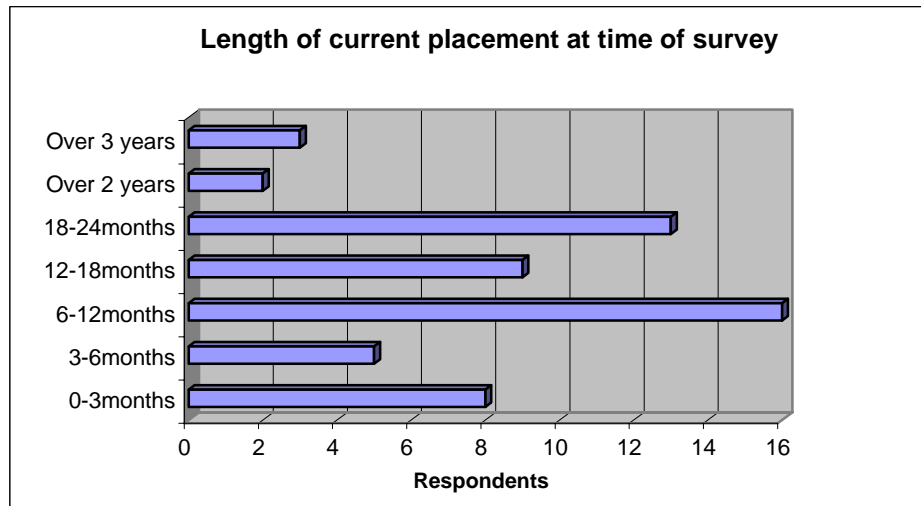


### Length of current placement at time of survey

Figure 2.3 shows that the greatest percentage of students (16) had spent between six and twelve months in detention or care at the time of the survey, nine students had spent between twelve and eighteen months in detention or care. Thirteen had spent between eighteen and twenty four months. There were 12 responses from students who had spent six months or less. Taking into account the settings the students are attending, a weighted average shows that students in detention had spent sixteen months there up to the time of the survey, those in high support had spent ten months and those in special care had spent on average just over four months. Two students had spent 2.5 years in a detention school, three students had spent over three years and two students who lived at home indicated they were attending a high support unit for day care only.

Generally the length of placement in a high support unit is understood as anything from two months to twenty four months. Placement in a special care unit is generally

between three and six months and students remanded or committed by the courts to a child detention school can spend anything from three months to four years there. This will change to between three months and three years when the amendments to the Children's Act 2001 come into force in 2007.



### **Student observations on curriculum provision**

Students responded to questions relating to their experience of the education provision in their detention or care setting. Seventy four percent (43) of students felt that they had received or found out information on the school (education) before starting classes. Students' initial impressions of the education provision indicated an overall satisfaction (79%) with the number of subjects available to them in the school, with only a slight difference in opinion as to whether they would have the same subjects as their previous school. The majority of respondents (88%) agreed that initially they were satisfied that they could receive help with reading and writing if needed. On initial viewing of the school the overriding opinions of students were that it would be possible for them to experience a variety of practical subjects. Ninety four percent (51) of students felt they would be able to participate in art/craft classes, 73% (41) metalwork/woodwork, 76% (42) felt they would be able to take part in games outside, and 89% (48) felt happy that it would be possible to study for examinations. There was less agreement on whether it would be possible to attend home economics classes or

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to learn and experience music/drama, with over half of respondents in both cases reporting they felt it would be possible.

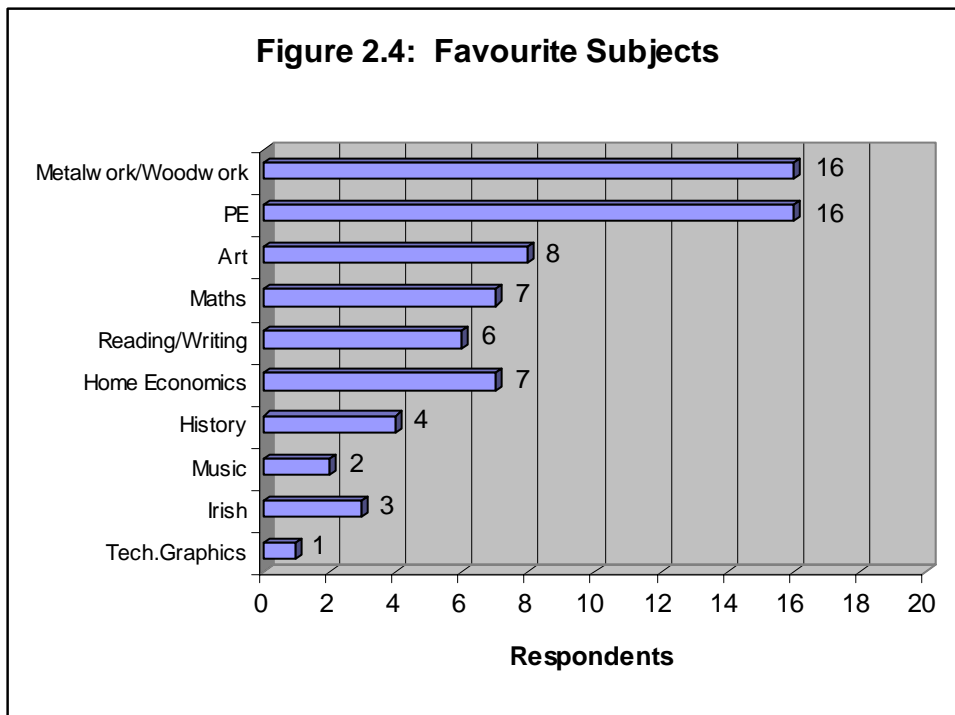
In seeking personal responses to their perception of education, a large majority (36) students offered their reasons for going to school as wanting to pass exams to get a job. Twenty-six felt they had no other option but to attend, 18 respondents claimed they went to school in order to learn new things and seven students gave 'loving school' as their reason for attending. Two students cited the aim of going to college with their reason for going to school and two other students gave their reasons as wanting to learn to "read and write".

### **Literacy/Numeracy**

On the question of whether or not students' reading/writing and mathematics had been tested before starting classes, 33 students said that they were tested. When asked if they felt they needed extra help in class in these areas a large majority of students (29) indicated that they needed extra help with reading, 25 felt they needed help with mathematics and 20 respondents felt they had writing difficulties that needed intervention. Three students expressed the view that they needed help with "everything" and four students indicated that they did not require any help in these areas. On the question of whether they was a "special teacher" whom they could go to for help in reading/writing or mathematics, 32 felt this resource was not available to them. A little over half of students who responded, (30) believed their teachers knew they needed extra help with some subjects. Six students felt their teachers did not know about their learning difficulties and 23 students indicated they were not sure.

### **Favourite subjects**

Figure 2.4 shows that metalwork, woodwork and physical education were the favourite subjects of the majority of students in detention/care. Art, mathematics, reading/writing, and home economics were the next most popular subject choices. History, Irish, technical graphics and music also featured in the responses offered.



### Reasons for liking subjects

The reasons students gave for choosing practical subjects like metalwork/woodwork were based around their enjoyment of making and doing. Enjoyment and fun were other emotions frequently expressed by students for all other subjects represented.

*Because you make things and take them home". "I enjoy working with my hands*

*... They are good fun and there are new things that you can learn that you never knew about*

*I like this subject because you have fun ...*

*I enjoy PE because you are running around and having fun". "I can do well at mathematics so I enjoy it*

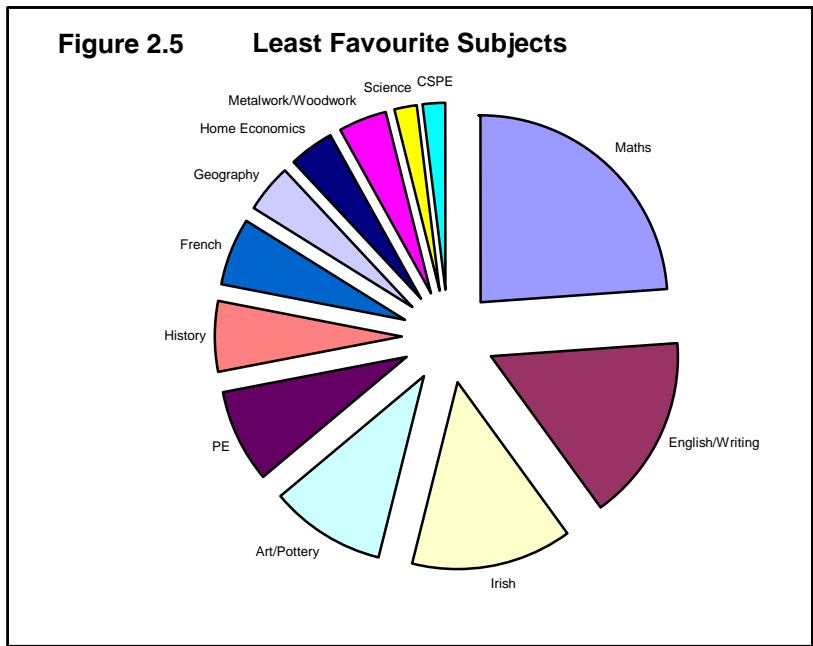
*I like cooking and it will be helpful when I get older...*

*To find out what went on before I was born. I really love Irish History*

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### Least Favourite Subjects

Figure 2.5 shows that Mathematics, English/writing and Irish were the least favoured subjects among the majority of students in detention/care. PE, history, and French, were the next least favourite subject choices. Geography, home economics, woodwork/metalwork, art/pottery, science and CSPE also featured in the responses offered but had a very low level of response.



### Reasons for disliking subjects

The main reasons students gave for disliking school subjects in detention/care were usually based around their perceived levels of success in and understanding of the subject.

e.g.

**English:** *“I can’t do it”. .... “I don’t like writing”. ... “Too much reading and writing”... “Writing takes too long”... “Because it’s difficult for me”*

**Mathematics:** *“It’s too hard”. ... “Because it is complicated and hard”. ... “Boring”.  
..  
“Because I’m not very good at it”.... “I’ve no interest and find it hard”*

**Irish:** *“I don’t understand it”. ... “I find it difficult”. ... “It’s a difficult language”.*

A large majority of students, (45) surveyed indicated they found the subjects at school while in detention/care to be 'ok'. Four students said they found the subjects very easy while only one student found the subjects on offer in detention/care to be very difficult.

### **Things that help students to learn well**

The majority of respondents felt the things that helped them learn well were namely

- teachers who are good at explaining things (56)
- teachers who take a genuine interest in the student (50)
- the feelings you can expect when you succeed (50)
- knowing that others will be happy for you and celebrate your success (44)

### **Positive feelings of self in present school**

When asked to explain a time when they were successful and felt good about themselves in their present school, the general response from 14 students was that school based tests, state examinations, and experiencing subjects for their intrinsic value could be considered as times when they felt good about themselves. Teaching strategies and classroom organisation adopted by the teacher accounted for ten of the reasons cited. There was evident enjoyment and personal satisfaction felt by respondents in experiencing practical type subjects such as woodwork, metalwork, home economics, and art in 12 cases. Seven students said that involvement in sporting activities gave them the greatest level of positive feeling. Achievement in literacy/numeracy activities were the stated reasons offered by three students for raising their feelings of self esteem. Five respondents stated that they never felt good about themselves in their present school.

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**Examinations/Subjects:**

*In mathematics we were doing measuring I got everything right...*

*When I did my Junior Cert because I never thought I would do it...*

*When I completed the practical in the home economics Junior Cert exam*

**Practical type subjects:**

*In art I made a flag of Ireland, seeing that I could make made me feel good*

*Cooking a meal in home economics...*

*When I made a mirror and coffee table in woodwork*

**Teaching strategies/classroom management:**

*When I got a lucky dip for all my good work...*

*I felt good when I won student of the week and was praised for it*

*When I improved at reading teachers praised me*

**Sport:**

*When we went surfing and wall climbing...*

*I could not play football before I came but now I am quite good at football*

*Winning at football... When I got on a sports team*

**Literacy/Numeracy:**

*When I was in mathematics I learned how to add...*

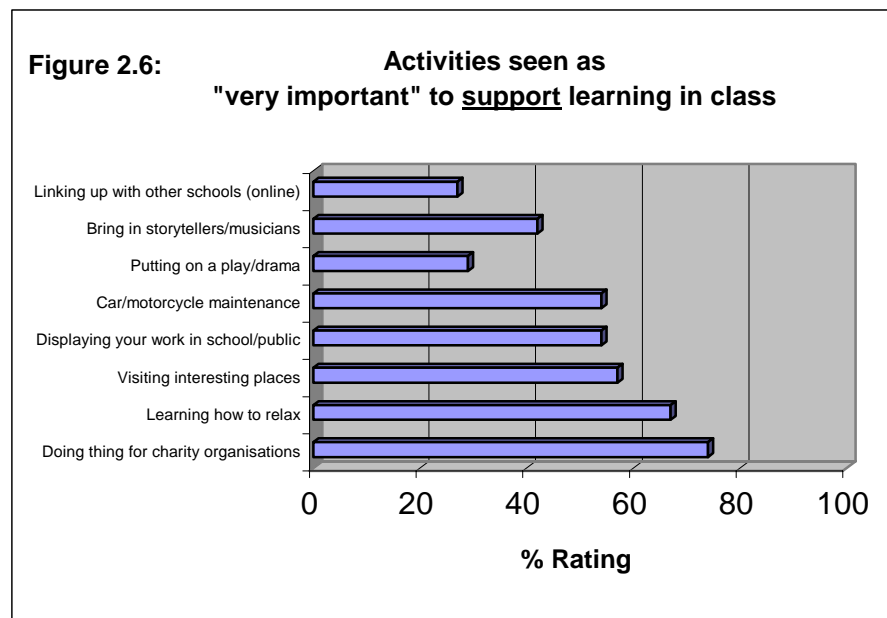
*I felt good about learning to read and write*

**Activities seen as important in supporting students learning**

When asked to rate the degree of importance they placed on a number of activities that could act as a support to their learning in class, the most popular activity chosen was “doing things for charity organisations” (41).

Learning how to relax (relaxation techniques) was acknowledged by 38 students as being very important in this regard. Visiting interesting places (34), and displaying their work in school and in public (31) were the next most important choices of students. Twenty-three students indicated that linking up with other schools (perhaps online) was definitely not important while 23 also felt that putting on a play/drama was not that

important as an activity for supporting learning. Other notable high percentage ratings in various activities can be seen in figure 2.6 below.



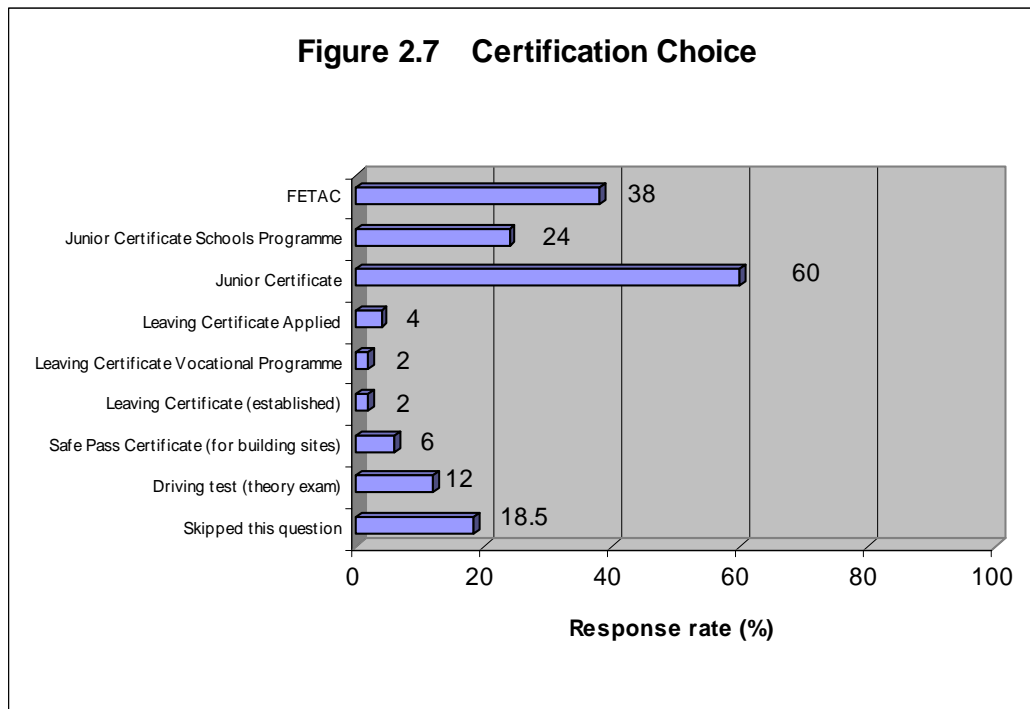
### **Activities seen as important in assisting students learning**

When asked to rate the degree of importance they placed on a number of items that could assist their learning in class, the majority of students (52) indicated that working at getting a qualification was most important for them. Two teaching strategies were rated very highly in students opinions of what worked best in assisting their learning in class. The teaching strategy of giving the student an explanation of the learning about to happen in the class including examples of work to be completed, was seen as “very important” for 47 students. The teaching strategy of allowing students the time to talk with friends and the teachers about the best ways to learn was seen as very important for 36 students. Computers were seen as very important for 35 respondents. Other items that received a “very important” response rating included

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Number of students (Very important)</b>
• Working at gaining a qualification	52
• Teacher explaining/providing examples of the learning	47
• Discussing best ways to learn with peers/teachers	36
• Using computers	35
• Project work with other classes and teachers	33
• Working in groups	31
• DVD/Television	29
• A Library	28
• Being involved in judging your own work	28
• Music (all types)	26
• Magazines	22

### Formal Certification

Figure 2.7 shows the Junior Certificate as the chosen level of certification being studied by 30 respondents. FETAC Certification (19) and the Junior Certificate School Programme (12) were the chosen routes to certification for the majority of students who responded. There was a smaller representation of students studying for senior cycle certification. Ten students skipped this question.



The certification choice indicated by student respondents in each school setting is shown in Table 2.0 below.

**Table 2.0: Certification/Programme choice of respondents**

<b>Certification</b>	<b>High Support</b>	<b>Special Care</b>	<b>Children Detention School</b>
FETAC	■	■	■
Junior Certificate School Programme	■		■
Junior Certificate	■		■
Leaving Certificate Applied	■		■
Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme	■		
Leaving Certificate (established)	■		
Safe Pass Certificate (for building sites)			■
Driving Test (theory exam)	■	■	■

*\* Two high support units have a dedicated primary school curriculum. Elements of the primary curriculum are to be found in all of the detention/care settings.*

### **Student thoughts on future career paths**

The future career aspirations described by the boys and girls in detention/ care were particularly divergent and in the interest of clarity are separated below by gender.

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## **Boys**

When asked for a description of what they would like to do upon leaving school, over half the boys (22) aspired to careers associated with skilled labour. These boys chose trades that had particular relevance to the building/motor industry. Eight said they would like to get a “good job”. Three boys could see themselves as DJ’s/Music production with two others indicating they would like to work with animals. One boy said he would like to go to college. Three of the boys said they were unsure. Five boys skipped this question. The breakdown of the specified trades were as follows...

- Mechanic 11 boys
- Carpentry/Building 8 boys
- Electrician 2 boys
- Painter/Decorator 2 boys
- Plumber 1 boy

## **Girls**

There was a 100% response rate from the girls to this question. All the girls had clear aspirations for their future career paths. Three girls intended going to college with one girl stating the course she would like to study while in college (recreation and leisure). Three girls indicated they would like a career as social care workers with two other girls preferring a career as a childcare worker. An air hostess and beautician/hairdresser were the career choices of the other girls.

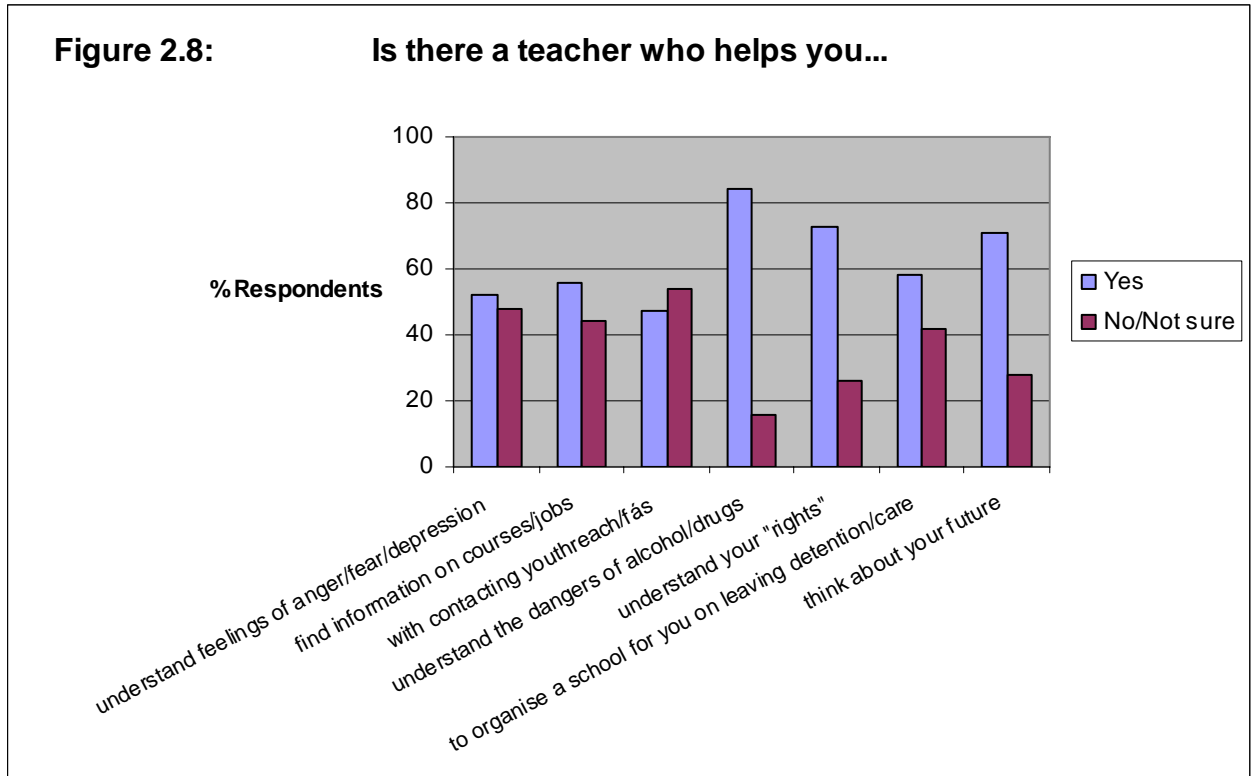
- College 3 girls
- Childcare 5 girls
- Hairdressing 3 girls
- Beautician 2 girls
- Air Hostess 1 girl

## **Wellbeing: Personal and Social Development**

This question set out to examine student’s awareness of learning areas associated with their personal, social, emotional and educational wellbeing.

Figure 2.8 shows that responses were divided to many of the questions posed on issues relating to the student’s personal and social development. However, the majority of students were in agreement on three learning areas currently available to them in the school that related to their personal and social development.

1. There is a teacher who explains about the dangers of alcohol/drugs. (45)
2. There is a teacher who helps you understand your “rights”. (39)
3. There is a teacher who helps you think about your future. (39)



### Subjects or short courses which students would like to see in the school

Taking an overview of the type of subjects or short courses that students felt they would like to see in their school, home economics was recommended by 13 students, metalwork (13), woodwork (9), car mechanics (6) and science (6). Two short courses were specifically suggested by two students, these were “nature walks” and “beauty therapy”. Eight students were happy with the current provision of subjects and short courses. The suggestions for alternative subjects/courses and their breakdown in terms of the type of school are shown in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1: Suggestions for alternative subjects and short courses**

<b>Suggested subjects/courses</b>	<b>Overall response</b>	<b>High Support</b>	<b>Special Care</b>	<b>Children Detention Schools</b>
Home Economics	13	----	----	13
Metalwork	13	7	2	4
Woodwork	9	7	2	----
Science	6	2	1	3
Car Mechanics	6	2	1	3
Music	4	2	1	1
Computers	3	----	----	3
Car Valeting	1	----	1	----
Art	1	1	----	----
French	1	1	----	----
Irish	2	1	1	----
PE	2	1	----	1
Drama	1	1	----	----
History	2	----	1	1
Geography	1	----	----	1
Business Studies	1	1	----	----
Nature	1	1	----	----
Beauty Therapy (manicure,pedicure, hairdressing)	3 girls	1 girl	2 girls	----

### **3. Commentary on the findings**

Emerging data must not be interpreted in isolation and the questionnaire as a survey instrument does allow a number of themes on student's experience of school to emerge. These themes will inform discussions that will take place as part of ongoing consultation with stakeholders. A number of such consultation meetings are planned for the school year 2006/2007. Data obtained from this student survey is combined with information garnered through informal discussions with principals/teachers and students in the various school settings to present an interpretation of the findings.

#### **Social Context**

We are all shaped by the social context in which we develop. Some of us are more fortunate in that regard than others, with strong family supports and strong social support networks.

A typical child in detention/ care is there as a result of a breakdown in their family support structure and/or the social supports available to them. Educational disadvantage and low literacy levels are proven by research to be contributory factors in juveniles turning to anti social behaviour and/or crime. Combinations of these factors are manifest in the children who are committed or placed in child detention schools, special care units and high support units.

#### **Gender / Average age of respondents**

When you consider the number of boys and girls in detention / care; boys are in the majority. The average age for both is fourteen years. There is one detention school for girls (Oberstown girls centre) and one special care unit specifically for girls (Glen Alainn,Cork). The special care unit at Ballydowd and the majority of high support units have an admittance policy that includes placement for girls. Eight percent of students who responded to the survey were 12 years or under. Recent amendments to the Children Act 2001, brought about by the Criminal Justice Act 2006, allow for an increase in the age of criminal responsibility from 7 to 12 years and the prohibiting of

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proceedings against a child under the age of 14 without the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions. Responsibility for four of the five child detention schools is to be transferred to the Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform and the fifth school (i.e. Clonmel) to the Health Service Executive. The HSE has responsibility for high support and special care units. The Department of Education and Science will retain responsibility for the education provision in children detention schools/ high support and special care settings.

### **Student's previous experiences of mainstream schooling**

Many respondents reported a variety of negative experiences relating to their previous mainstream school. Suspension, repeated suspension leading to expulsion or disengagement was the indicated path taken by the majority of respondents currently in a detention or care setting.

The fact that almost a third (30%) of respondents could not recall any positive experience they had in a mainstream school and (25%) skipped this question could be interpreted as an indication of the level of disaffection / disillusionment they felt with these schools. From the types of responses received it is clear that the mainstream schooling system has been unable to make the necessary adjustments and provisions to cater for the needs of these children.

The majority of negative statements from students on their experience of previous mainstream schools were associated with teachers' attitudes and actions towards them when in class. This correlates with the findings of the ESRI study *Pathways through the Junior Cycle – the experiences of second year students*, (2006), where students also reported on negative interaction with teachers and with the school. Students in lower stream classes in the ESRI study reported the highest levels of negative interaction with teachers as did those who rated themselves as below average ability.

Practical type subjects, team sports, PE, and school trips were the subjects or activities which gave the students the most satisfaction in previous mainstream school. Students indicated their enjoyment of “making and doing” and any activities that involved them actively taking part in the learning.

### **Placement of respondents/care plan/IEP**

The limited amount of places in the special care / high support system mean there is a strict admittance policy for these settings, while children in detention centres are placed there under a detention order from the High Court. Children may also be placed on remand to a detention centre (*awaiting proceedings to be taken against them*) or on remand for assessment (*to allow the court to make an informed judgement on appropriate placement*).

When a child is admitted to a detention or care setting a comprehensive assessment is carried out by a team, consisting of psychologists, care staff, and education staff. A care plan and an Individual Education Plan (IEP) are established. An exit strategy is also considered at this time and the care plan, IEP and the exit strategy remain the focus of subsequent case conferences that take place between the education and care partners during the child’s time spent in care/detention. These case conferences can also include the child and his/her parents.

Generally, children placed in detention centres receive a sentence of two years. Children in special care and high support are generally not aware of the time period they may spend there, which does raise questions about the sense of hopelessness this portrays together with the possible negative impact on a student’s sense of purpose and future vision of themselves. A timeline of care/education is examined and planned for through the case conferences by an interdisciplinary team. This timeline culminates with the arrangement of an “exit strategy” for the child’s subsequent return to their community.

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## **Student experiences of school while in detention / special care unit / high support unit**

Respondents indicated a very high satisfaction rating with the schools they are now attending while placed in detention centres, special care units and high support units. This was backed up with very positive comments from students about their teachers during visits to the centres/units. It is clear from the findings that students in these schools are receiving extra help from their teachers in addressing their literacy, numeracy, social and emotional needs. Over half of respondents admitted to having difficulties with basic literacy/numeracy which they felt was acknowledged and was being addressed by their class teachers. However a little over half of respondents did indicate that a “special teacher” was not available to them on a one to one or small group basis to provide extra support for these specific needs. Considering that 62% admitted to having difficulties with reading, basic literacy should form a key thread for further consultation with all stakeholders. The small pupil teacher ratio was commented on by many students as being extremely helpful to them in terms of “not getting left behind” in class. It is evident from the findings that a very positive pupil teacher relationship exists in all the detention and care settings, with students speaking very highly of their teachers and the school.

The practical subjects, such as metalwork, woodwork, home economics, art and physical education are a clear favourite for the majority of respondents and there are clear links made by students between the idea of “fun / enjoyment” and these subjects. When students were asked to indicate times when they felt good about themselves, a large majority of students based their response around activities embedded in these subjects. In the schools which did not offer these subjects, many respondents listed them under the choice of subjects they would like to see in their school. These findings mirror those of the ESRI study *Pathways through the Junior Cycle – ‘the experiences of second year students’, (2006)* which reported that 58% would have liked to have taken subjects with a practical orientation but could not; the practical subjects were also reported in the ESRI study to be the student’s favourite choice at first and second

year. The theme of 'fun' in reference to the learning is also evident in the ESRI study, one of the opinions given for describing the most effective teachers in the views of the second year students were teachers who viewed learning as fun.

The least favourite subjects reported by respondents in the detention/care settings were mathematics, English/writing and Irish. The ESRI study also found Irish and mathematics to be among the least favourite subjects mentioned by second years. The fact that English/writing is among the three least favourite subjects for students in the detention/ care school setting is an indication of the difficulties that these students have experienced to date in their formal mainstream schooling and an issue that now needs to be strategically addressed in their current and subsequent school placements. The majority of reasons given by students for not liking these subjects were again similar to the ESRI Study with many finding the subjects boring, too hard, not interesting, having difficulties with them and not being good at them.

### **Student response to teaching and learning in the detention/ care setting**

Students were aware of, and indicated the types of teaching strategies that helped them to learn well. When asked to indicate times when they felt good about themselves in their present school, 20% of students referred to instances of good teaching strategies and good classroom management skills adopted by the teacher, to support this. Interest shown by the teacher in the well-being of the student and praise and rewards offered by the teacher for good behaviour and class work were also frequently mentioned. The majority of respondents regarded teachers who were good at explaining things in class, who took a genuine interest in the learner and who celebrated their success, as demonstrating examples of good teaching strategies. From the findings of this survey it is clear that these observations were not based on student experiences in previous mainstream school but on the quality of teaching and learning they now experience in the detention and care settings. The ESRI research backs up these findings by indicating similar student views on how they are taught and what they regard as effective teaching, i.e. teachers who explain things well, view learning as fun, encourage students to ask questions, praise good work and don't give out.

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## Supporting/assisting learning

The majority of respondents (71%) indicated that “doing things for charity organisations” would help support their learning in class; evidence volunteered by subject teachers supported their participation in such worthwhile activities. Learning how to relax, bringing in storytellers/musicians, and putting on a play/drama were other activities which students felt would be supportive to their learning but no evidence was supplied to indicate involvement in these pursuits. Students did feel that displaying their work in school/public and visiting interesting places were other ways that their learning could be supported and some evidence was provided to indicate their participation. Examples of the students art /craft work are on display in many of the schools and students recalled school trips with both care and education staff with much enthusiasm.

A very high percentage of respondents (88%) rated “working at getting a qualification” as their main choice of activity that assisted them in their learning. This was followed by responses that included an appreciation of good teaching strategies (*especially involving the teacher explaining and giving examples of the learning about to take place*) and the use of computers to assist classroom learning. Discussing the ways people learn best and talking about the learning that is taking place was also recognised by the majority as key activities in this regard. Approximately 50% of respondents viewed working in groups, project work and being involved in judging their own work as important classroom activities that could assist their learning. The range of positive teaching methodologies and approaches that students were aware of is noteworthy considering the negative school experiences that many have been exposed to in the past and is testament to the quality of teaching they are now experiencing.

## **Formal Certification/ Continuum of education/training**

There is quite a range of certification options available to students in the detention and care school settings. Considering that the average age of respondents was 14 years it is not surprising that the Junior Certificate is a dominant feature in these schools, with 60% of respondents indicating participation. FETAC awards were also frequently used by all three school settings. Some students also indicated participation in The Junior Certificate School Programme. There was less of a response related to the Leaving Certificate. Many students take FETAC modules in parallel with their Junior Certificate subjects. The range of levels/ subject areas within FETAC allow a teacher to provide a structure to the learning in areas where the student may need extra help or where he/she expresses an interest in a particular topic. The short term nature of this awarding structure is also of benefit to students who do not yet have the confidence to study for the Junior Certificate and whose self esteem and confidence would benefit from experiencing the success of gaining a recognised award for a relatively short term input. The length of stay of some students within the detention/care setting is an argument in favour of a modularised provision.

The importance of the Junior Certificate award within the detention/care settings should also be emphasised. It provides a continuation in the learning, from the student's previous mainstream school to their future mainstream school. A student who is placed in a detention/care setting and attends school there, should not return to mainstream education at a greater disadvantage (educationally) than when they left. This continuum of care/education is another key issue for further discussions especially in relation to provisions available through the *Education (Welfare) Act 2000* and the assistance soon to be made available to early school leavers and their families through the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) in helping early school leavers access appropriate educational and training opportunities.

The provision of intensive support to these young people is all the more pressing when one considers data from a tracking system in operation within the Step Down Unit at Trinity House School and outlined in their report "*Outcomes 2005*". This report indicates that within the first three months of leaving Trinity House, 70% of young people who left the school were in prison, this figure rises to 75% within six months

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and reports 80% of the young people who left Trinity House in 2005 to be in prison within one year.

### **Student's future vision of self**

The high proportion of boys who either viewed themselves in careers associated with skilled labour or getting a "good job" is notable. The fact that college was the expectation of one boy and three girls is an unsurprising finding given the many negative experiences of mainstream education the young people have had to date. By examining the listed career choice of respondents one can make a distinction with the findings from the ESRI study. None of the boys or girls held any aspirations for careers at the higher professional end of the scale. The majority of students opted for career choices that could be considered "traditional" in nature with boys choosing careers such as mechanic, builder, electrician, carpenter and girls seeing themselves as childcare workers, hairdressers, beauticians and air hostesses.

### **Wellbeing: Personal and Social Development**

From the findings one can see that there was a good indication of student engagement with SPHE/CSPE issues. Given the life experiences to date of many of the young people in detention/care it is very important that every opportunity is taken to promote their self esteem, self confidence and an internalised framework for responsible decision-making. However student involvement in the area of educational guidance, counselling or psychological services appears to be minimal. The importance of these services for young people at risk or experiencing social exclusion cannot be emphasised enough.

There was little evidence given of parental involvement, involvement of outside agencies, guest speakers, performers or artists.

## **4. Next Steps:**

Themes that emerge from the findings of the student survey together with the findings of the principal/teacher survey will form part of subsequent discussion and debate with the established consultative group. The consultative group is representative of all the stakeholders involved in the care/education of the young people placed in these settings and will guide the work of the NCCA in developing an enabling curriculum framework for children in schools attached to detention centres, special care units and high support units.

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# APPENDIX

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