THE BREAKING THE CYCLE SCHEME IN RURAL SCHOOLS: FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

Susan Weir, Lisa Milis, & Catherine Ryan

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Educational Research Centre
St Patrick's College, Dublin

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Breaking the Cycle* scheme was introduced in 1996/97 to 123 rural schools to assist them in addressing problems associated with catering for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The scheme provides for grants for the purchase of books, teaching materials and equipment, a dedicated grant for out-of-school activities and special projects, and incareer development programmes for teachers. A major provision of the scheme is the appointment of shared co-ordinators in clusters of participating schools to work with pupils and their families. The aim of the evaluation of the scheme was to assess the scheme's overall effectiveness, to identify models of good practice, and to examine how participation affected schools, teachers, and pupils. An evaluation report in 1998 provided information on schools, teachers, and pupils in the year before the scheme began and in its first year of operation. An interim report in 2000 described some of the early effects of the scheme, and provided baseline data on the Junior Cycle completion rates of a cohort of pupils who had received their primary education in the selected schools prior to the introduction of the scheme. The present report describes the scheme's effects on participants over the five years of its pilot phase.

At the time of applying to participate in *Breaking the Cycle*, schools undertook to develop a five-year plan designed to respond to the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Data on the planning process in the areas of curriculum, school organisation, and home-school liaison were gathered on two occasions, once in 1998, and again in 2001 at the end of the pilot phase of the scheme. The majority of schools in 2001 cited English as their curriculum priority, with the vast majority of these focusing on developing pupils' English reading and writing skills. The most common home-school priorities were the organisation of educational or extracurricular courses for parents, followed by increasing parental involvement in school activities more generally. The organisation of various types of sporting event and school outings were the most frequently cited organisational priorities. The data collected indicate that the effects of the planning process on schools were very beneficial. Apart from the fact that the majority of schools perceived improvements in prioritised areas, other positive outcomes were noted. For example, there is evidence that the planning process served as a learning process for schools, as the priorities themselves, as well as strategies and methods of evaluating them, were subject to revision over the course of the scheme. Furthermore, the planning process was described by some as having led to a greater sense of connectedness and community among school staff, pupils, and parents.

Despite declining enrolments, staffing levels in participating schools remained stable over the course of the pilot phase. However, schools' access to non-class teachers appears to have increased over the same period. In particular, almost all schools had access to a remedial teacher by the fifth year of the scheme, compared to less than half of schools in the first year. The data collected also show that, in some cases, schools used a portion of the funding under the scheme to engage sessional

teachers in various areas. Principals indicated that while they had little difficulty in retaining class teachers in their schools, they were experiencing difficulties attracting teachers to their schools, mainly due to the schools' isolated location, and the shortage of qualified teachers.

Schools were much better resourced in terms of materials and equipment than had been the case prior to the scheme. The additional funding enabled schools to purchase a wide range of necessary items over the first five years, and significant decreases were noted in the percentage of principals who claimed that their capacity to teach in key areas was adversely affected by a shortage or inadequacy of equipment or books. Indeed, school staff cited the extra funding for materials and equipment as one of the most important benefits of the scheme, especially in light of the difficulties of fundraising in communities with a small number of families, many of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The importance of fostering and maintaining links between the home and the school is widely acknowledged. The development of home-school links was seen as a major aim of the scheme in rural schools from the outset, and work with parents was considered to be a key element of the cluster co-ordinator's role. Data collected from principals over the first four years of the scheme indicate that parents had a good deal of contact with schools, and were involved in a wide range of school-related activities. These ranged from participating in educational and extracurricular courses to assisting in the running of events such as concerts and sports days. In fact, there was a substantial increase over the life of the scheme in the percentage of schools that organised both educational and extracurricular courses for parents. One interesting finding is that the percentage of parents who visited the school on their own initiative also increased significantly, possibly signifying that the school was perceived by parents to be a more welcoming place. This change might also reflect the work of co-ordinators in their development of relationships with the families served.

Principals were unanimous in their agreement that *Breaking the Cycle* had had a beneficial overall effect on their schools, while virtually all said that teaching practice and staff morale had been positively affected by participation. Principals also perceived a range of beneficial effects on pupils, which included improvements in academic achievement, increases in self-esteem, and improved standards of social interaction. Almost all principals in the final year of the pilot phase indicated that pupils had benefited from participation in the scheme, most notably from their participation in out-of-school activities / special projects, and from their access to improved learning materials and equipment. Principals also felt that teachers were more aware of the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and some emphasised the benefits pupils had derived from contact with the co-ordinator.

Teachers generally held positive views of the scheme. Most thought that it had improved their understanding of the nature of educational disadvantage, and that their attitudes and teaching practices had changed as a result of participating in the scheme. Towards the end of the pilot phase, there was a significant increase in the percentage of teachers who felt that the scheme was of benefit to

marginalised pupils. The data also suggest that, towards the end of the pilot phase, teachers became more sure of their ability to influence pupils' performance, and were more likely to attribute their success or failure in teaching pupils to their own efforts or abilities rather than to factors beyond their control. However, in some areas, teachers held relatively low expectations for pupils. There was no change over the life of the scheme in the percentage of teachers – only about one-third – that estimated that 80% or more of their pupils would continue their education beyond Junior Certificate. This contrasts with the educational aspirations of pupils themselves, of whom 93% indicated that they thought they would continue in school as far as Leaving Certificate or third level. The figure from pupils resembles much more closely the figure of 93.4%, which was the actual Junior Cycle completion rate of a cohort of pupils who were tracked to Junior Certificate in 1997, and who received their primary education in the selected schools prior to the introduction of the scheme (see Weir & Ryan, 2000).

The scheme's effect on pupils is clearly of critical importance in judging its effectiveness. The range of potential effects at pupil level is broad, and may include a reduction in absenteeism, improvements in behaviour and discipline, changes in attitudes towards school and schoolwork, and improved achievement. The evaluation attempted to assess the extent to which each of these was affected by participation in the scheme.

There was no significant improvement in pupil attendance over the pilot phase of the project. However, the average attendance rate in *Breaking the Cycle* schools of about 92% over a four-year period compares favourably with the daily attendance rates of 90-91% in all Dublin city schools over the same period. Furthermore, absenteeism among 3rd and 6th class pupils was low on the days of achievement testing in 1997 and 2000. Attendance during testing at 6th class level was comparable with that at 3rd, and attendance levels were similar in 2000 and 1997. There was a significant decrease in the number of chronic low attenders between the first year of the scheme and 1999/2000, but it should be noted that the number of such pupils was very small in both years.

Data collected from principals indicate that, at Junior level, the prevalence of late arrival at school was the only type of pupil misbehaviour to increase significantly between 1995/96 and 1999/2000. Over the same period, a significant reduction in absenteeism was noted among Middle-level pupils, while the incidence of tobacco use declined significantly among Senior pupils. About half as many 3-day suspensions were meted out to pupils in 1999/2000 as in the year immediately preceding the introduction of the scheme. However, the numbers of pupils involved in various types of misbehaviour were very small, and overall, there was very little change in discipline levels over the life of the pilot scheme. If anything, the data suggest that the scheme may have had a small positive impact on discipline levels, but that discipline problems were rare in the selected schools.

Standardised achievement tests in reading and Mathematics were administered to a sample of pupils in 3rd and 6th classes in the first and fourth years of the scheme. Test results in 1997 indicated that the achievements of pupils were comparable with those of pupils nationally. Tests administered

to the same grade levels three years later (in 2000) recorded no significant improvement in average achievement. The failure of the scheme to effect improvements in the key area of pupil achievement should be considered in light of the fact that pupils' achievements on both occasions did not differ from those of the norm groups. Therefore, to significantly increase their achievements, pupils in the selected schools would have needed to outperform pupils on whom the test was standardised, which may be an unreasonable expectation. The data, did, however, indicate that pupils' achievements were slightly weaker in Mathematics than in reading, and that 6th class pupils' achievements were slightly weaker than those of pupils in 3rd class. A possible explanation for the former may be contained in information provided by schools, which indicated that English was much more common as a curriculum priority in the school plan than Mathematics, that more class time was spent on English than on Mathematics during the school week, and that learning support teachers were more likely to be deployed to address the literacy, rather than Mathematical, needs of weaker pupils. The slight disparity in achievement favouring 3rd class pupils may be suggestive of a widening of the achievement gap between pupils from more favourable backgrounds and those from less favourable backgrounds as they progress through school.

A questionnaire administered to pupils in 6th class revealed that they held very positive attitudes towards school and schoolwork. Furthermore, there is some evidence that pupils' attitudes improved between 1997 and 2000, with significantly more pupils in 2000 indicating that they felt that they were doing well at school, and significantly more wishing to, and expecting to, proceed in school as far as third level. There was no increase, however, in pupils' liking for school between 1997 and 2000. Girls were more positive than boys towards school, with fifteen times as many boys as girls claiming to dislike school 'a lot'; the educational aspirations and expectations of girls also exceeded those of boys. In some cases, pupils' attitudes were associated with higher reading and Mathematics scores; the strongest of these relationships were between pupils' achievements and the length of time they wished to, and expected to, remain in formal education.

It is likely that the effects of the *Breaking the Cycle* intervention on pupils will be wide-ranging. Some of the scheme's effects might be expected in the long-term rather than in the short-term. For example, to examine the scheme's effects on rates of early school leaving, the Junior Cycle completion rates in 2007 of pupils who were in Junior Infants when the scheme began will be compared with those of a sample of pupils who received their primary education in participating schools prior to the introduction of the scheme.

1. INTRODUCTION

This section of the report describes briefly the background to the scheme, and how schools were selected to participate. Characteristics of schools at the start of the scheme (based on their application data in 1996) are also described. Finally, the aims and objectives of the scheme are outlined, as are the evaluation activities undertaken during the five years of the pilot phase of the scheme.

1.1. BACKGROUND TO THE SCHEME

An earlier evaluation report (Eivers & Weir, 1998) provided a detailed description of the background to the introduction of *Breaking the Cycle* in 1996. In it, the concept of educational disadvantage was reviewed, and the history of attempts to address educational disadvantage in Ireland was described. This report will describe only the immediate antecedents of the scheme.

In early 1995, the Combat Poverty Agency approached the Educational Research Centre to undertake an investigation of the criteria used in designating urban and rural schools as disadvantaged. Specifically, the terms of reference of the study were to: (a) consider and report on the rationale which should underlie designation as disadvantaged; (b) assess the appropriateness of current indicators and, if necessary, suggest improvements and/or other measures; and (c) review existing support measures, and if necessary, suggest improvements and/or other measures.

Following investigation of the above, the *Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage* was deemed to be in need of reform, and several recommendations were put forward for consideration (Kellaghan, Weir, Morgan & Ó hUallacháin, 1995). A key recommendation was that resources should be targeted on a limited number of schools with high concentrations of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and low levels of achievement. The envisaged intervention would be a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to meeting the needs of educationally disadvantaged children (e.g., the approach was conceived as involving appropriate curriculum adaptation, the appointment of co-ordinators to serve clusters of schools, and the reform of school organisation to develop a unity of purpose and build on existing strengths of teachers and pupils). In addition, it was suggested that the participation of selected schools in the scheme should be supported by appropriate advice and specially tailored inservice training for school staffs.

It was further proposed that acceptance into the scheme should be dependent on the school undertaking to formulate a five-year plan of action. The plan was to be based on an examination of problems in the school, and should describe existing deployment of resources and how additional resources would be used. Implicit in the plan was the setting of targets to be met during the five-year period of intervention, as well as the monitoring of progress towards the attainment of the targets.

The Department of Education responded to these recommendations by engaging the Educational Research Centre to develop revised criteria for selecting schools for participation in a new

scheme targeting schools serving pupils in acutely disadvantaged areas. The proposed scheme was envisaged as catering in very different ways to the needs of small and large schools. Therefore, specially tailored criteria were developed for use in the selection of rural and urban schools.

1.2. THE SELECTION PROCEDURE IN RURAL SCHOOLS

The indicators used to select schools for the new scheme were in accordance with the suggestions outlined by Kellaghan et al. (1995). Based on investigations of the appropriateness of existing criteria (used to select schools for the Department of Education's *Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage*), it was recommended that the number of indicators used to identify schools in disadvantaged areas be increased, and that the relative weightings given to each indicator be re-evaluated. The choice of indicators, and the weights attached to them, took a number of factors into account.

First, long-term unemployment and the receipt of Smallholder Assistance were included as useful measures of poverty, and were accorded a weight of 2. Second, family possession of a medical card was included as an indicator due to the extent to which it had been shown to predict school attainment (early leaving) and achievement (literacy and numeracy difficulties) in Junior Certificate Examination performance (see Kellaghan et al. 1995). Medical card possession was accorded a weight of 2, which is the weight it achieved in regression analyses of indicators used in the *Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage* to predict attainment and achievement. Third, an indicator relating to lone-parent families (used in the designation of schools as disadvantaged at second level) was included. Finally, as was the case in urban schools, two new indicators relating to the educational attainments of pupils' parents were included. These were designed to take into account the close relationship observed in previous studies between parental educational level, poverty, and children's educational achievements. In the absence of a rationale for doing otherwise, single weighting was applied to parental education and lone-parent indicators. On the basis of responses to these questions, an index of disadvantage was computed for each applicant school. The indicators used to select rural schools, along with their relative weightings, are shown in Table 1.1.

Schools were also asked to provide information in a range of other areas including the numbers of pupils and teachers in the school, the school's membership of schemes to assist disadvantaged pupils, the school's willingness to prepare a five-year plan, willingness to share a co-ordinator with other schools, willingness to participate in additional inservice, and willingness to participate in the administration of achievement tests to pupils.

Table 1.1. Indicators (and their associated weights) used to rank order schools (when summed) for selection for the rural dimension of *Breaking the Cycle*.

Indicator	**Maximum points**
% of pupils in the school whose mother did not take at least the Group or Intermediate Certificate Examination [1]	100 points
% of pupils in the school whose father did not take at least the Group or Intermediate Certificate Examination [1]	100 points
% of pupils in the school living in a family in which the main breadwinner was unemployed for a year or more [2]	200 points
% of pupils in the school living in a family that receives assistance because of limited means from farm income [2]	200 points
% of pupils in the school living in a family that holds a medical card [2]	200 points
% of pupils in the school living in a lone-parent household[1]	100 points
Maximum total	**900 points**

[1] Single weighting; [2] Double weighting

The selection of schools for participation in the rural phase of *Breaking the Cycle* was carried out during the summer of 1996. All primary schools in the country with four teachers or fewer (*N*=1,915) were sent an application form inviting them to participate in *Breaking the Cycle*, which was described as a pilot scheme for schools serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Completed applications were received from 692 schools (36.1% of the total number of applications sent out). In their application, schools were asked to provide the information specified in Table 1.1. On the basis of this information schools were assigned a score which permitted them to be ranked from the most disadvantaged to the least. Following this, schools were assigned to one of ten categories depending on their scores. The 10% of schools with the highest scores were assigned to Category A; the next highest scoring 10% were assigned to Category B, and so on. Categories were also identified numerically to reflect their degree of disadvantage. Schools in the highest scoring category (A) were assigned a score of 10; schools in the next category (B) were assigned a score of 9, and so on down to 1 for schools in the lowest category.

It was decided to select clusters of schools rather than individual schools for the rural scheme as it would not be economically feasible to provide additional services to individual small schools. A total of 123 small schools were selected for inclusion in the scheme on the basis of information submitted in the applications. Geographical location (i.e., the location of several disadvantaged schools which were geographically proximal) was taken into account in the selection.

It was not the intention to give extra full-time staff to individual rural schools participating in *Breaking the Cycle*. However, rural schools were to be given access to an extra resource, in the form of a scheme co-ordinator, for approximately one day per week. Because the rural component of *Breaking the Cycle* was organised around the idea of a co-ordinator serving a cluster of schools, all

schools in a cluster had to be reasonably close to each other. As many schools as possible from the highest scoring category were selected. All but four (of the 25) clusters had at least one school that was in the top 10% of schools in terms of disadvantage. Of the schools that were selected, most would also have been selected using their total application score alone. Eighty-one of the 123 selected were ranked among the 123 most disadvantaged applicants. One hundred of the 123 schools selected were ranked between 1 and 160 (from a possible range of 1 to 692). Thus, despite having to consider geographical and other issues, the great majority of selected schools were applicants that were most disadvantaged according to the application criteria.

It should be noted that there are greater concentrations of clusters in some areas of the country than in others, with most of the clusters being located in the West or North West. However, a self-selection bias may have operated, as proportionately more applications were received from schools in Mayo and Donegal (the counties with the greatest number of clusters) than from other regions. The tendency for some counties to have higher rates of application for schemes of assistance has been noted previously. In a paper in which various proposals for the identification of rural primary schools for the *Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage* were discussed, Kellaghan (1996) reported that the highest rates of application in 1994 were from schools in Donegal (64% of schools), Leitrim (56%) and Mayo (53%). Counties that had the lowest rates of application were Louth (23%), Meath (21%), Monaghan (20%), and Cavan (15%). When examined by county, the application rates to join *Breaking the Cycle* are not dissimilar, with Donegal and Mayo in the top three, and Cavan, Louth and Monaghan in the bottom four. This may indicate that there are greater numbers of disadvantaged pupils in counties that have higher application rates. However, a lack of awareness of schemes designed to address disadvantage, or a reluctance to apply for them, may also help to explain the low application rates (and the relatively low representation in schemes) of some counties.

1.3. CHARACTERISTICS OF SELECTED SCHOOLS ON THE APPLICATION INDICATORS

It is of interest to examine the extent to which schools that were successful in their applications were characterised by each of the indicators of disadvantage, particularly given that socio-economic factors were not the only consideration in the selection of schools. For this reason, data showing the percentage of pupils in the selected schools that were characterised by each of the application indicators are presented in Table 1.2. As the table shows, the profile of the population served by the selected schools is quite a disadvantaged one. At a time when the rate of long-term unemployment nationally was almost 7%, the average percentage of long-term unemployed breadwinners in families served by these schools was almost 56%. According to the 1996 Census of Population, in 1996, 11.2% of all private households were classified as lone-parent households (National Economic and Social Forum, 2001). This compares with a figure of only 7% – a good deal lower than the national

rate – among families served by rural schools selected for *Breaking the Cycle*. The families of almost three-quarters of pupils served by the selected schools possessed medical cards, and principals indicated that about half of all parents had not achieved at least an Intermediate Certificate or Group Certificate qualification.

Table 1.2. Percentage of long-term unemployed[1] breadwinners, families in receipt of Smallholders' Allowance, lone-parent families, and mothers and fathers with low educational attainments among the families of pupils in selected schools in 1996 (*N*=123).

Application variables					
% L.T. unemployed breadwinner	**% in receipt of Smallholders' Allowance**	**% holding medical card**	**% lone-parent family**	**% mothers no Inter / Group cert.**	**% fathers no Inter / Group cert.**
Mean	***Mean***	***Mean***	***Mean***	***Mean***	***Mean***
55.9% (23.5)	**38.1% (28.1)**	**73.9% (16.7)**	**7.0% (5.5)**	**44.6% (22.5)**	**57.6% (23.6)**

[1]In 1996, the rate of long-term unemployment nationally was 6.9% (Ireland, 1999).

1.4. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF BREAKING THE CYCLE

The new scheme, to be known as *Breaking the Cycle of Educational Disadvantage*, was described by the (then) Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, in September 1996 as "…an important new initiative which seeks to break the cycle of educational disadvantage in selected urban and rural areas". The Minister proceeded to describe the aim of the scheme as follows: "This *Breaking the Cycle* initiative seeks to discriminate positively in favour of schools in selected urban and rural areas which have high concentrations of children who are at risk of not reaching their potential in the education system because of their socio-economic backgrounds" (Ireland, 1996).

It is clear from these statements that the aims of the scheme, as initially conceptualised, are broad in nature. In order to "break the cycle of educational disadvantage", one might think in terms of breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. While it is clearly beyond the scope of the scheme to bring this about directly, the scheme should aim, at the very least, to improve the educational experiences of children, so that they are better than those of their parents. Indeed, it is possible that such improvements would have a positive effect on children's life chances generally, including their economic prospects as adults.

It is also possible to infer some of the aims of the scheme from the issues of concern to the evaluation. For example, an effective scheme would be expected to produce some improvement in the observable effects of disadvantage, such as poor achievement levels and rates of early school leaving. Indeed, in a thesis which examined the early implementation of the urban phase of scheme, Grant (1998) stated that:

> Broadly speaking, the aim of *Breaking the Cycle* is to effect improvements in attainment, attendance and participation in education for the pupils identified in the targeted schools. The

> overall aim of the project is to strengthen the ability of each participating school to provide quality education for all its pupils by supporting each school in developing improvement strategies which are designed to break the deterministic social mould which surrounds educational disadvantage. There is an expectation on the part of the Department of Education and Science that the opportunities being offered will enable schools to break the cycle of school failure and that benefits will accrue in terms of the attainments of pupils, their attendance at school and their level of participation in the education system. (p.8)

As the achievement gap between pupils from poor socioeconomic backgrounds and those from more advantaged backgrounds tends to widen as they progress through the school system (Douglas, 1964; Martin, 1979), an effective scheme might be expected to reduce this gap. It might also be expected to make the school environment more pleasant for pupils, which could positively impact on attendance and retention levels. Furthermore, a successful intervention might be expected to increase teachers' expectations of their pupils, as well as pupils' educational expectations and aspirations. It should be noted that the schools themselves, through their five-year plan for *Breaking the Cycle*, have identified priority areas in which they expect to bring about positive change (see Chapter 2). Many of the strategies adopted by schools to address their curricular, home-school, and organisational priorities depend on the supports (e.g., funding and personnel) made available under the scheme. Furthermore, the incareer development opportunities available to staff in the target schools, which are specially tailored to the needs of teachers working with disadvantaged pupils, might lead to an enhanced understanding of disadvantage, and, ultimately, positively impact on pupils.

1.5. EVALUATION ACTIVITIES OVER THE FIVE YEARS OF THE PILOT PHASE OF THE SCHEME

The large numbers of schools and teachers involved in both the urban and rural dimensions of *Breaking the Cycle* meant that the possibilities for one-to-one interviews with school staff were limited. Consequently, a great deal of the evaluation data were collected using questionnaires. Questionnaires seeking information on a wide range of school variables were sent to school principals towards the end of each year of the 5-year pilot phase of the scheme. Selected data from these questionnaires are presented in Chapter 5. In the final year (2000/2001), principals were sent a school planning questionnaire to complete in consultation with their class teachers. Information derived from responses to this questionnaire is presented in Chapter 2. All class teachers were sent questionnaires in each of years one to four of the scheme, and selected findings are presented in Chapter 6.

The achievements of pupils in participating schools were measured at two points during the pilot phase of the scheme. All 3rd and 6th class pupils in a sample of 50 schools were tested in English reading and Mathematics in 1997, and again in 2000. The testing of pupils in 1997, although it took place shortly after the scheme had started, was done with a view to treating the results as baseline data. (Although this is a limitation of the evaluation, it was outside the control of the evaluators, as the request to evaluate the scheme was not made until after the scheme had started). At the time of testing

(in both 1997 and 2000), 6th class pupils responded to a pupil questionnaire designed to elicit their attitudes to school, self, and home. A summary description of pupils' achievements is presented in Chapter 3, while Chapter 4 describes pupils' attitudes, and the relationship between their attitudes and their achievements. Throughout the course of the report, attempts are made to assess the impact of the scheme on schools, teachers, and pupils in light of the aims outlined in section 1.4. For example, pupil achievement levels are examined to investigate if there is any evidence that the gap between the achievements of senior pupils and those of pupils nationally is greater than that between junior level pupils and pupils nationally. Furthermore, the availability of test results in the first and fourth years of the scheme permits an examination of any changing trends in achievement.

Apart from gathering information in questionnaire format, the views of school staff on the operation of the scheme were sought during visits to a selection of schools in Mayo, Donegal and Tipperary. These visits were described in an earlier evaluation report (Weir & Ryan, 2000), and so will not be described here. The evaluators were conscious that it was desirable to keep school personnel apprised of evaluation findings, and, for this reason, summaries of both the preliminary and interim reports on the scheme (submitted to the Department in 1998 and 2000 respectively) were circulated to all schools. Test results for each child who participated in the achievement testing were sent to their class teacher, along with a guide to interpreting them. When appropriate and practicable, evaluators attended inservice training sessions organised by the Department of Education and Science for teachers, co-ordinators, and principals.

In addition to the above, the evaluators were in regular contact with principals, co-ordinators, and teachers. For example, during the 1996/97 school year, more than 300 telephone calls were either received from, or made to, participating schools. The nature of the contact was extremely varied, but included calls from co-ordinators organising schedules for pupil testing, from teachers seeking clarification of questionnaire items or discussing the results of achievement testing, and from principals advising of staffing changes.

2. SCHOOL PLANNING FOR *BREAKING THE CYCLE*

Participation in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme was contingent upon the school undertaking to formulate a five-year plan of action. It was recommended that the plan be based on an examination of the problems in the school, and that it describe how existing and additional resources would be deployed. Implicit in the School Plan was the setting of targets to be met during the five-year period of intervention, as well as the monitoring of progress towards the attainment of these targets. It was recognised that plans would not be fixed and rigid; if new priorities were identified, or if strategies and evaluation methods were found to be ineffective, the plan could be revised.

Principals were asked a series of open-ended questions about their five-year School Plan first in the 1997/98 School Questionnaire[1], and again in the 2000/01 Planning Questionnaire. Items in both questionnaires were designed to elicit information on the schools' curriculum priorities, organisational priorities and home-school priorities. Principals were also asked to describe the strategies that were employed to achieve the objectives, and the methods that were used to evaluate the success or failure of the strategies. As the 2000/01 questionnaire was completed towards the end of the pilot phase of the scheme, items in it also asked principals to report on the positive and negative outcomes of the strategies.

It was hoped that comparison of the results from 1997/98 and 2000/01 would provide an indication of shifts in schools' priorities, strategies, and evaluation techniques. Furthermore, it was expected that data on *outcomes*, which were collected in the 2000/01 questionnaire, would provide insight into the general success or failure of the initiatives outlined in the five-year plan.

Despite these intentions, various methodological issues rendered a direct comparison of the 1997/98 and 2000/01 results difficult. Specifically, the 1997/98 School Questionnaire simply asked principals to *describe their curriculum priority*. As a result, principals reported on a diverse range of curriculum areas and many principals detailed more than one priority. Consequently, it was often difficult to establish which strategies and evaluation methods related to which curriculum area. In 2000/01, when asked to describe a curriculum priority, principals were given a choice of describing *only one English or one Mathematics* curriculum priority[2]. For the most part, limiting the description to English or Mathematics solved the problem of principals reporting on more than one curriculum

[1]While all the schools included a plan in their initial application to join the scheme in 1996, it was felt that information collected on the School Plans in 1997/98 would be more informative for the final evaluation, as the plans which were developed in 1996 were prepared before staff had received training on school development planning and before schools had received information on matters such as cluster composition.

[2]In order to assess the schemes' impact on pupils, data were collected on the Mathematics and English achievements of a sample of pupils participating in the scheme. Thus, it was felt that information relating to English or Mathematics curriculum priorities would be the most informative. Also, it was clear from principals' responses in 1997/98 that English and Mathematics were the most common priority areas.

area[3], and made it easier to link specific strategies and evaluation methods with specific curriculum priorities.

As was the case for curriculum priorities, many principals in 1997/98 reported on more than one organisational and home-school priority, making it difficult to link the various priorities, strategies, and evaluations. In 2000/01, the question specified that only *one* organisational priority and *one* home-school priority should be described, although a number of principals still supplied more than one priority for each.

To facilitate analysis, all responses were grouped into categories. Because it was difficult to link specific elements of the School Plan in 1997/98, all the curriculum areas were pooled and the objectives, strategies and modes of evaluation were reported as a group (i.e., across curriculum areas) (Figure 2.1). The same format was used for the organisational and home-school priorities in 1997/98 (Figure 2.2 and 2.3, respectively). However, these categories were modified in 2000/01, as it was possible to identify a number of objectives under each priority area and then associate specific strategies with specific objectives (Figures 2.4, 2.5, 2.6 and 2.7).

While the use of different coding categories enabled a more detailed analysis of the 2000/01 results, it also served to limit the comparisons that could be made between 1997/98 and 2000/01. Therefore, principals' responses to the 1997/98 and 2000/01 questionnaires are presented separately. Overviews of the 1997/98 results, along with a brief description of the findings, are presented in Section 2.2. Overviews of the 2000/01 results, along with a more comprehensive review of the 2000/01 English curriculum priorities, Mathematics curriculum priorities, organisational priorities, and home-school priorities are then presented in Sections 2.3 through 2.6[4].

2.1. OVERVIEW OF CURRICULUM, ORGANISATIONAL AND HOME-SCHOOL PRIORITIES DESCRIBED BY SCHOOLS IN 1997/98

Of the 120 returned School Questionnaires in 1997/98, 11 did not contain any details about a school plan. Eleven schools detailed their curriculum priority only, one school gave details of curriculum and organisational priorities only, and 21 schools gave details of their curriculum and home-school priorities only. Principals' descriptions of these curriculum, organisational, and home-school priorities, the types of strategies employed to meet them, and the methods of evaluating the strategies are outlined in Figures 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 below.

[3] Where principals described both Mathematics *and* English curriculum priorities, only the first description was coded.

[4] Where possible, general comparisons with the 1997/98 results are made at the end of these sections.

Figure 2.1. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting various curriculum areas, curriculum priorities, types of strategies used to achieve objectives, and methods of evaluating the strategies (*N*=109).

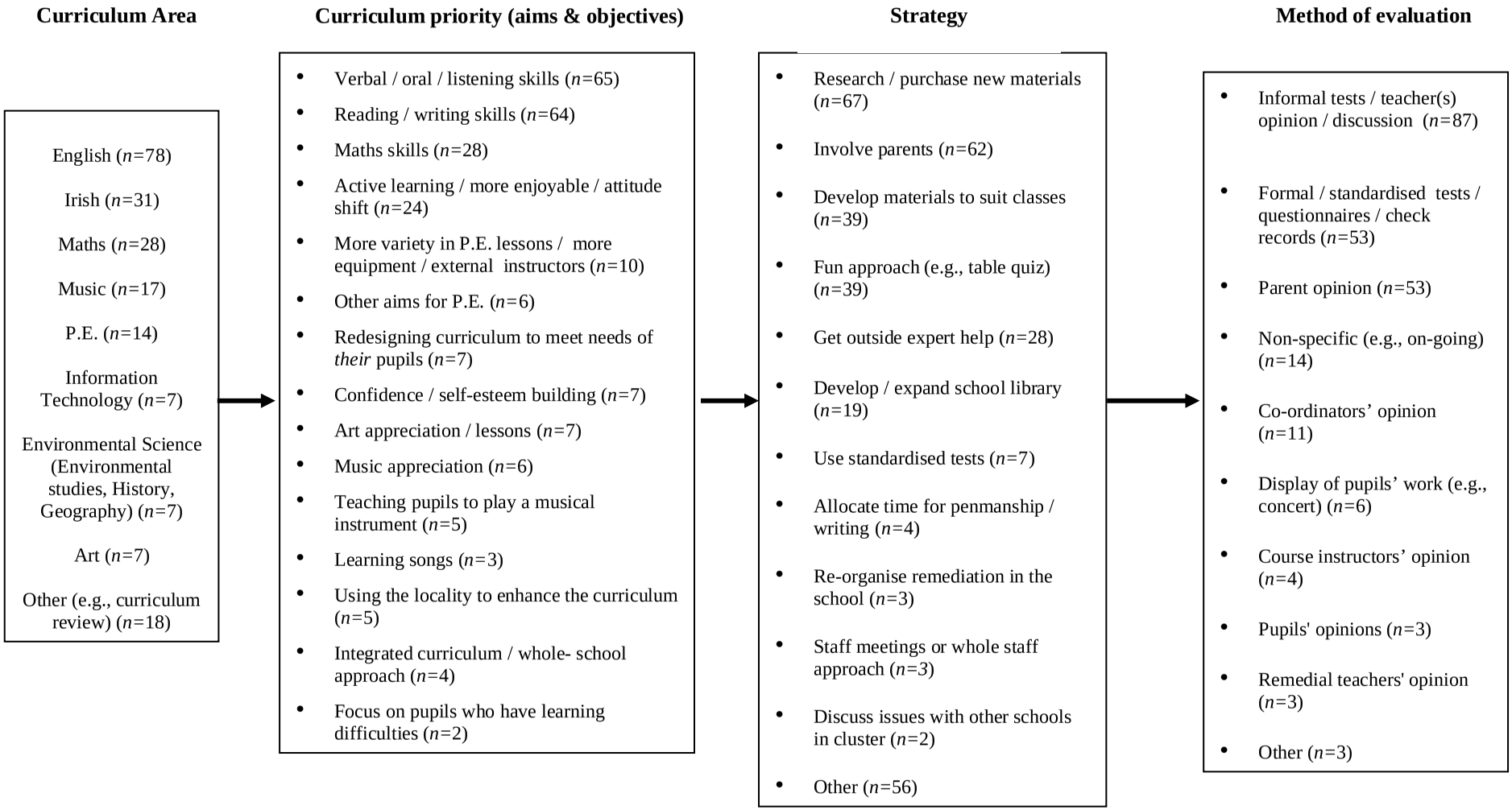


Figure 2.2. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting various organisational priorities, types of strategies used to achieve objectives, and methods of evaluating the strategies (*N*=77).

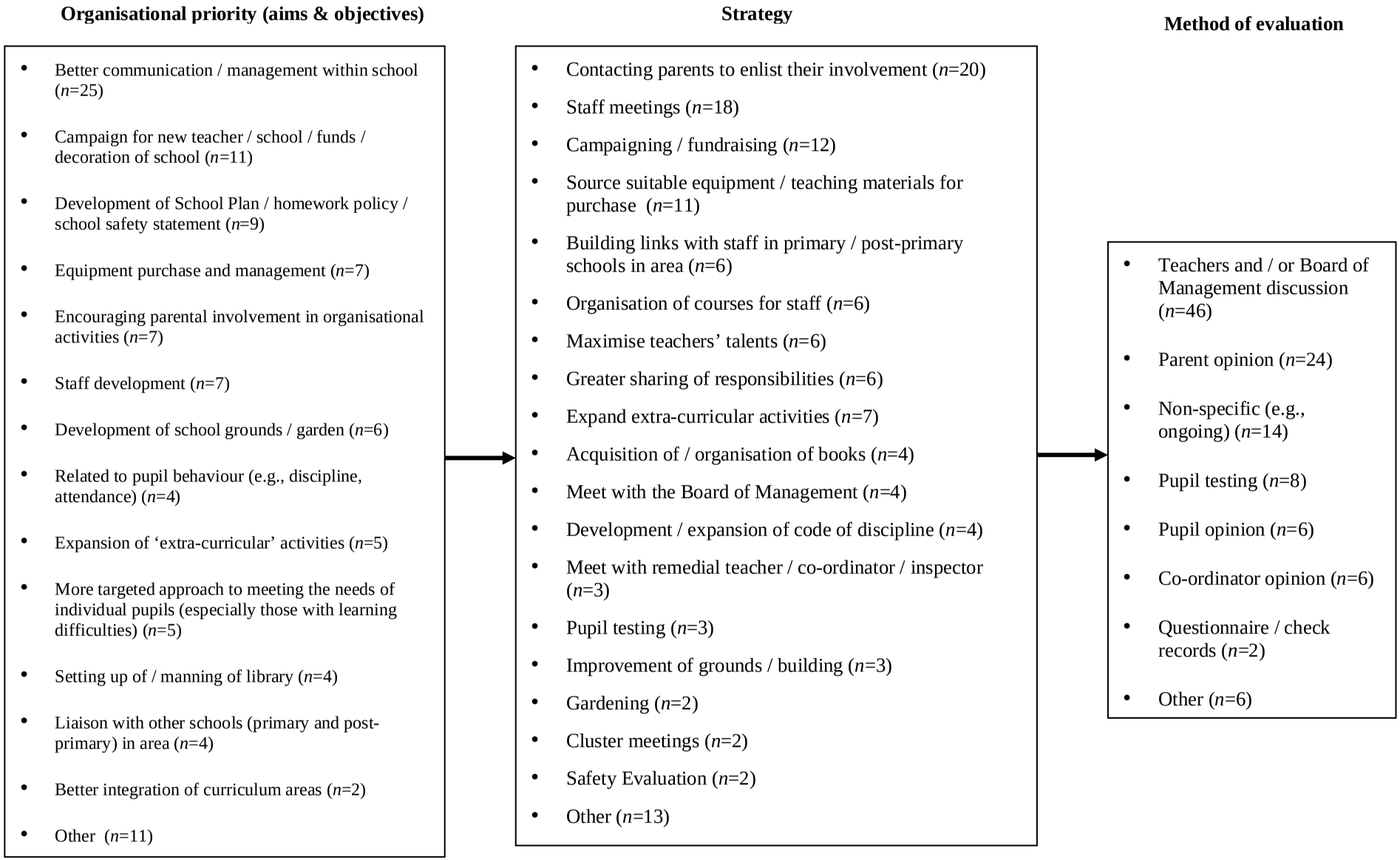
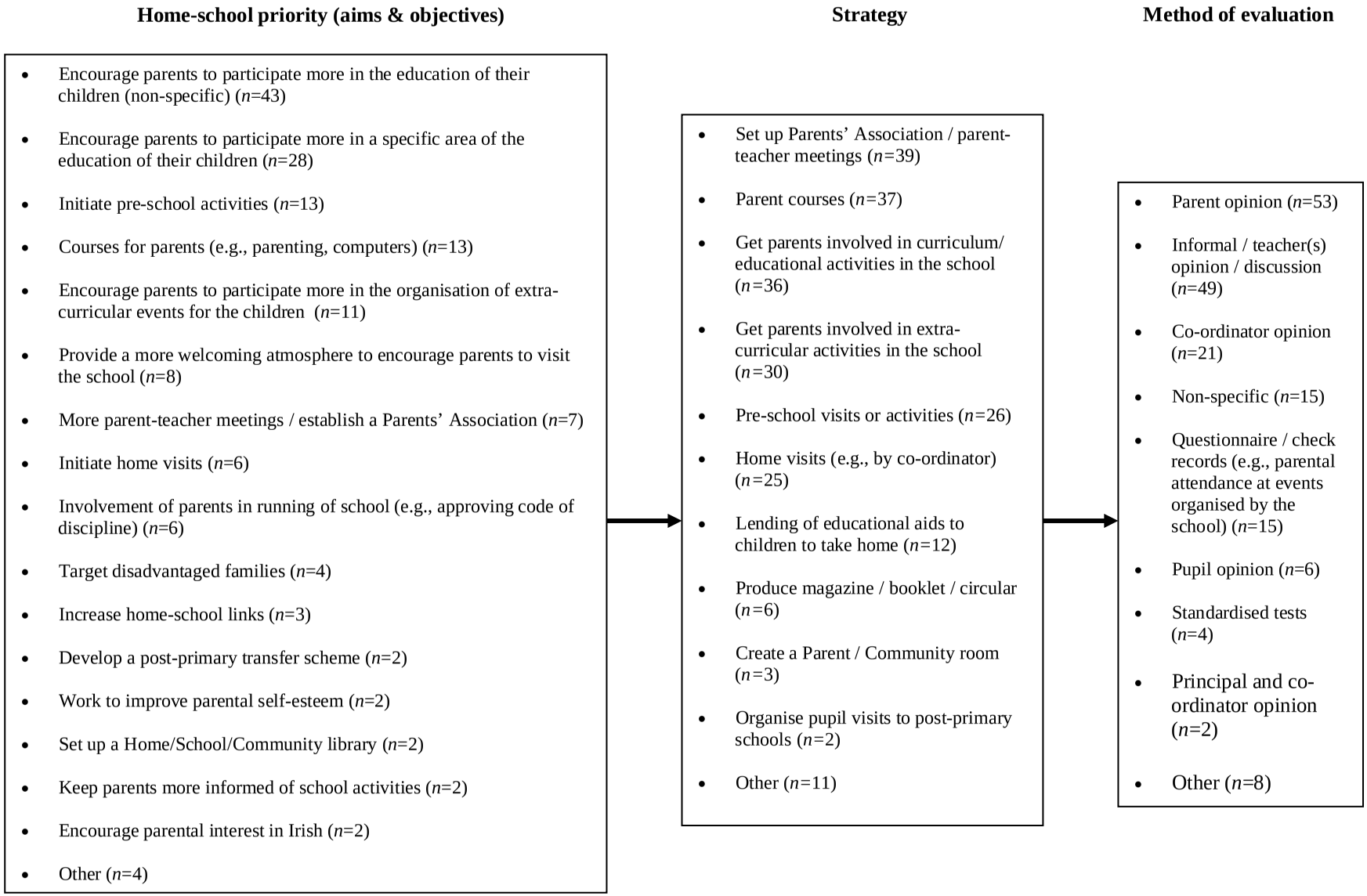


Figure 2.3. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting various home-school priorities, types of strategies used to achieve objectives, and methods of evaluating the strategies (*N*=97).



Of the 120 School Questionnaires which were returned in 1997/98, 109 principals provided descriptions of their school's *curriculum priorities*. Table 2.1 shows the frequency with which each curriculum area was identified. English, Irish and Mathematics were the most commonly mentioned curriculum areas, followed by Music, P.E., Environmental Science, Art, and Information Technology. Eleven principals described other priorities which were difficult to classify, such as self-esteem and curriculum reviews.

Table 2.1. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting curriculum priorities, by curriculum area (*N*=109)*.

Curriculum Area	**Number**	**%**
English	78	71.6%
Irish	31	28.4%
Mathematics	28	25.7%
Music	17	15.6%
P.E.	14	12.8%
Social and Environmental studies	7	6.4%
Art	7	6.4%
Information Technology	7	6.4%
Other (e.g., curriculum review, self-esteem)	11	10.1%

*Numbers sum to greater than 109 as many respondents described more than one curriculum priority.

When asked about specific *objectives and aims* within the prioritised area, the majority of principals reported more than one objective. Table 2.2 shows the main categories of aims reported by principals.

Table 2.2. Number of principals in 1997/98 who reported various categories of aims and objectives for curriculum priorities (*N*=109)*.

Type of priority (aims and objectives)	**Number**	**%**
Verbal / oral / listening skills	65	59.6%
Reading / writing skills	64	58.7%
Mathematics skills	28	25.7%
Active learning / more enjoyable / attitude shift	24	22.0%
More variety in P.E. lessons / more equipment / external instructors	10	9.2%
Redesigning curriculum to meet needs of *their* pupils	7	6.4%
Confidence / self-esteem building	7	6.4%
Art appreciation / lessons	7	6.4%
Other aims for P.E.	6	5.5%
Music appreciation	6	5.5%
Teaching pupils to play a musical instrument	5	4.6%
Using the locality to enhance the curriculum	5	4.6%
Integrated curriculum / whole-school approach	4	3.7%
Learning songs	3	2.8%
Focus on pupils who have learning difficulties	2	1.8%

*Numbers sum to greater than 109 as respondents provided more than one response.

As Table 2.2 demonstrates, there was considerable variety in the types of curriculum aims and objectives advanced by principals. The majority of objectives were related to the core curriculum areas of English and Mathematics. The objectives for other curriculum areas tended to be more general, and included, for example, plans to create an attitude shift in their pupils so that schoolwork would be perceived as more enjoyable, and intentions to tailor the curriculum to the needs of their pupils.

Schools varied even more in the types of *strategies* they planned to use to address their curriculum priorities. As there were a considerable number of strategies reported for each curriculum area, to make the information more digestible, general strategies (or those applicable across curriculum areas) were analysed, and are shown in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting various types of general strategies to be used in addressing curriculum objectives (*N*=109)*.

Strategy	**Number**	**%**
Research / purchase new materials	67	61.5%
Involve parents	62	56.9%
Develop material to suit classes	39	35.8%
Fun approach (e.g., table quiz)	39	35.8%
Get outside expert help	28	25.7%
Develop / expand school library	19	17.4%
Use standardised tests	7	6.4%
Allocate time for penmanship / pre-writing	4	3.7%
Re-organise remediation in the school	3	2.8%
Staff meetings or whole staff approach	3	2.8%
Discuss issues with other schools in cluster	2	1.8%
Other	56	51.4%

*Numbers sum to greater than 109 as respondents provided more than one response.

The strategy most frequently cited was the intention to access new equipment and materials, followed by the intention to increase parental involvement. Thirty-nine schools planned to develop material to suit their classes, while a further 39 planned a more 'fun' approach to teaching in the hope of increasing pupil interest. Principals also reported employing strategies such as enlisting the assistance of experts, developing or expanding the school library, adopting a whole-school approach, improving the organisation of remedial teaching in the school, and consulting with other schools in the cluster. At least one other type of strategy was reported by 56 schools, with many reporting a number of strategies that did not fall into the more general categories. For example, six principals intended to

encourage Irish comhrá among pupils, while three intended to teach pupils to appreciate music, and seven intended to promote 'proper' English conversation.

Principals were also asked to indicate how their school planned to *evaluate* the success of their curriculum priorities. Most schools had clear evaluation strategies, the most common being discussion among school staff (59.9%), followed by consulting parents and holding parent-teacher meetings (47.7%) (Table 2.4). Forty-four schools (41.1%) planned to use standardised tests, while 28% planned to use informal tests[5]. Eighteen schools (16.9%) either gave evaluation categories that were not specific enough to categorise, for example, 'yearly' or 'ongoing', or did not specify any method of evaluation. Thirteen schools (12.1%) planned to use teacher's observations; eight planned to consult with co-ordinators[6]; and six planned to include a demonstration of skills learned by pupils, for example, a school concert given by those who were learning Music (5.6%). Finally, 15 schools listed methods of evaluation such as consulting with other schools in the cluster, which were coded as 'other'.

Table 2.4. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting various types of methods for evaluating the success of attempts to improve in prioritised curriculum areas (*N*=107)*.

Evaluation	Number	%
Staff discussion	64	59.9%
Parent opinion / discussion with parents / parent-teacher meetings	51	47.7%
Formal / standardised tests	44	41.1%
Informal tests	30	28.0%
Non-specific (e.g., ongoing, yearly)	18	16.9%
Teacher observation / opinion	13	12.1%
Co-ordinator discussion	8	7.5%
Display of pupils' work (e.g., concert)	6	5.6%
Other (e.g., performance or display of work done)	15	14.0%

*Numbers sum to greater than 107 as respondents provided more than one response.

Only 77 of the 120 principals who returned School Questionnaires in 1997/98 gave any details of *organisational priorities* within the School Plan. The main types of organisational priorities reported are shown in Table 2.5.

[5] The number of schools planning to use formal standardised tests may be underestimated. For example, where principals said that they planned to use 'assessment' or 'various tests', rather than specifying *standardised tests*, the responses were classified as 'informal tests', although principals *may* have been referring to formal testing.
[6] The number of schools planning to use co-ordinators as evaluators may be underestimated. For example, when a principal specified that the evaluation was to be performed by 'staff', this was not coded as including co-ordinators. That aside, a large number of schools did not mention the co-ordinator as an active agent in strategies associated with the achievement of curriculum priorities.

Table 2.5. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting various categories of aims and objectives associated with their organisational priorities (*N*=77)*.

Type of priority (aims and objectives)	**Number**	**%**
Better communication / management within school (e.g., more even distribution of decisions and workload)	25	32.5%
Campaign for new teacher / school / funds / decoration of school	11	14.3%
Development of School Plan / homework policy / school safety statement	9	11.7%
Equipment purchase and management	7	9.1%
Encouraging parental involvement in organisational activities	7	9.1%
Staff development	7	9.1%
Development of school grounds / garden	6	7.8%
Expansion of 'extra-curricular' activities	5	6.5%
More targeted approach to meeting the needs of individual pupils (especially those with learning difficulties)	5	6.5%
Related to pupil behaviour (e.g., discipline, attendance)	4	3.7%
Setting up of / manning of library	4	3.7%
Liaison with other schools (primary and post-primary) in area	4	3.7%
Better integration of curriculum areas	2	1.8%
Other	11	1.4%

*Numbers sum to greater than 77 as respondents provided more than one response.

The three most commonly cited types of organisational priorities included the improvement of communication or management within the school, the initiation of some type of campaign, for example, lobbying T.D.s for an extra teacher, and modification or expansion of the School Plan. Some of the other priorities included purchasing and managing equipment, encouraging parental involvement in organisational activities within school, improving the school grounds, and expanding extra-curricular activities.

As mentioned, many schools reported more than one organisational priority, making it difficult to assign specific strategies to specific priorities. Table 2.6 summarises the main types of *strategies* schools planned to use to address their organisational priorities (without reference to specific priorities). The three most common strategies included contacting parents to enlist their involvement, increasing the number of staff meetings, and campaigning or fundraising. Purchasing

new materials and improving links with other schools in the area were also popular strategies, as was expanding the range of extra-curricular activities.

Table 2.6. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting various types of strategies to be used in addressing their school's organisational objectives (*N*=77)*.

Strategy	**Number**	**%**
Contacting parents to enlist their involvement	20	26.0%
Staff meetings	18	23.4%
Campaigning / fundraising	12	15.6%
Source suitable equipment / teaching materials for purchase	11	14.3%
Expand extra-curricular activities	7	9.1%
Building links with staff in primary/ post-primary schools in area	6	7.8%
Organisation of courses for staff	6	7.8%
Maximise teachers' talents	6	7.8%
Greater sharing of responsibilities	6	7.8%
Acquisition of / organisation of books	4	5.2%
Meet with the Board of Management	4	5.2%
Development / expansion of code of discipline	4	5.2%
Meet with remedial teacher / co-ordinator / inspector	3	3.9%
Pupil testing	3	3.9%
Improvement of grounds / building	3	3.9%
Gardening	2	2.6%
Cluster meetings	2	2.6%
Safety Evaluation	2	2.6%
Other	13	16.9%

*Numbers sum to greater than 77 as respondents provided more than one response.

A number of intended strategies also related to teachers, and included organising courses for staff, maximising the use of teachers' talents within the school, and promoting a greater sharing of responsibility among teachers.

Principals also reported a wide variety of other strategies intended to support the implementation of their organisational objectives. Some were aimed at increasing pupil-teacher contact time, or teaching time. For example, one school planned to increase the time allocated for circle time. Other strategies related to school planning, such as research into school organisation and management.

There was considerable overlap between the organisational objectives and the strategies within the School Plans. For example, parental involvement, campaigning, and the purchase of new equipment were described as both objectives and as strategies. This might be due to principals' different interpretations of the items. However, it may also be indicative of the value that schools place on these particular factors in the School Plan.

Principals reported a variety of methods for *evaluating* the effectiveness of strategies associated with their school's organisational priority (Table 2.7).

Table 2.7. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting various types of strategies for evaluating the success of their school's organisational strategies (*N*=69)*.

Method of evaluation	**Number**	**%**
Teachers (s) and /or Board of Management discussion	46	66.7%
Parent opinion	24	34.8%
Non-specific (e.g., ongoing)	14	20.3%
Pupil testing	8	11.6%
Pupil opinion	6	8.7%
Co-ordinator opinion	6	8.7%
Questionnaire / check records	2	2.9%
Other	6	8.7%

*Numbers sum to greater than 69 as respondents provided more than one response.

Over half of principals (66.7%) reported using teacher opinion or discussions with the Board of Management to evaluate the success or failure of their strategies. This finding is not surprising given that most of the organisational objectives and strategies focused on teachers and school staff. Consulting parental opinion was the next most common method of evaluation. Other evaluation techniques involved testing pupils, consulting pupils, co-ordinators' opinions, and using questionnaires and records.

Ninety-seven principals provided some details about their school's *home-school priorities*, with most reporting more than one (Table 2.8).

Table 2.8. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting various categories of aims and objectives associated with their home-school priorities (*N*=97)*.

Type of priority (aims and objectives)	**Number**	**%**
Encourage parents to participate more in the education of their children (non-specific)	43	44.3%
Encourage parents to participate more in a specific area of the education of their children	28	28.9%
Initiate pre-school activities	13	13.4%
Courses for parents (e.g., parenting, computers)	13	13.4%
Encourage parents to participate more in the organisation of extra-curricular events for the children	11	11.3%
Provide a more welcoming atmosphere to encourage parents to visit the school	8	8.3%
More parent-teacher meetings / establish a Parents' Association	7	7.2%
Initiate home visits	6	6.2%
Involvement of parents in running of school (e.g., approving code of discipline)	6	6.2%
Target disadvantaged families	4	4.1%
Increase home-school links	3	3.1%
Develop a post-primary transfer scheme	2	2.1%
Work to improve parental self-esteem	2	2.1%
Set up a Home/School/Community library	2	2.1%
Keep parents more informed of school activities	2	2.1%
Encourage parental interest in Irish	2	2.1%
Other	4	4.1%

*Numbers sum to greater than 97 as respondents provided more than one response.

Most of the home-school priorities concerned the promotion of parental involvement, and included, for example, encouraging parents to participate more in their children's education in general, or in a specified area. Other priorities included developing a post-primary scheme, setting up a home/school/community library, and targeting disadvantaged families.

Overall, a wide variety of *strategies* to address the home-school priorities were reported by principals. Table 2.9 shows the main types of strategies planned by schools, across all types of home-school priorities.

Table 2.9. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting various types of strategies to be used in addressing their school's home-school priorities (*N*=97)*.

Strategy	**Number**	**%**
Set up Parents' Association / parent-teacher meetings	39	40.2%
Parent courses	37	38.1%
Get parents involved in curriculum / educational activities in the school	36	37.1%
Get parents involved in extra-curricular activities in the school	30	30.1%
Pre-school visits or activities	26	26.8%
Home visits (e.g., by co-ordinator)	25	25.8%
Lending of educational aids to children to take home	12	12.4%
Produce magazine / booklet / circular	6	6.2%
Create a Parent / Community room	3	3.1%
Organise pupil visits to post-primary schools	2	2.1%
Other	11	11.3%

*Numbers sum to greater than 97 as respondents provided more than one response.

Again, most strategies involved increasing parental involvement, for example by setting up Parents' Associations, increasing the number of parent-teacher meetings, or getting parents involved in curricular and extra-curricular activities.

Other strategies included planning pre-school activities, for example creating a pre-school toy library, increasing co-ordinators' home visits, lending educational games, videos and books to pupils to take home, producing some form of information sheet (e.g., a school magazine or a booklet for prospective parents), and creating a parents' or a community room in an empty classroom.

As was the case with the organisational priorities, many of the objectives and strategies for the home-school priorities overlapped. For example, creating a Parents' Association and organising parent courses was listed as both a priority and a strategy, suggesting that parental involvement is an integral part of most schools' five-year plans.

Regarding methods of *evaluating* the effectiveness of home-school objectives, just over half of those who indicated a priority planned to obtain parents' opinions (Table 2.10). The next most frequently reported source of evaluation was teacher opinion or informal discussion among

teachers. Other evaluation sources included co-ordinators', principals' and pupils' opinions, questionnaires and records, and standardised tests. Several schools reported using non-specific methods of evaluation that were "ongoing", or involved planning an open display of pupils' work.

Table 2.10. Number of principals in 1997/98 reporting various types of methods for evaluating the success of their school's home-school strategies (*N*=91)*.

Method of evaluation	**Number**	**%**
Parent opinion	53	58.2%
Informal / teacher(s) opinion /discussion	49	53.9%
Co-ordinator opinion	21	23.1%
Non-specific	15	16.5%
Questionnaire / check records (e.g., parental attendance at events organised by the school)	15	16.5%
Pupil opinion	6	6.6%
Formal / standardised tests	4	4.4%
Principal and co-ordinator opinion	2	2.2%
Other	8	8.8%

*Numbers sum to greater than 91 as respondents provided more than one response.

As the 1997/98 School Questionnaires were distributed early in the life of the scheme, principals only reported on their school's *intended* priorities, strategies and methods of evaluation, and no information regarding the *outcomes* of the strategies was sought at that time. However, additional items regarding the positive and negative outcomes of attempts to address curriculum, organisational and home-school priorities were incorporated in the 2000/01 questionnaire and are included in the relevant sections below.

2.2. ENGLISH CURRICULUM PRIORITIES IN 2000/01

Of the 115 principals who provided details of a curriculum priority in 2000/01, 104 reported English as their main priority. Figure 2.4 provides an overview of the English curriculum priorities, the strategies employed to achieve the objectives associated with the priorities, the methods of evaluating these strategies, and the positive and negative outcomes of the strategies.

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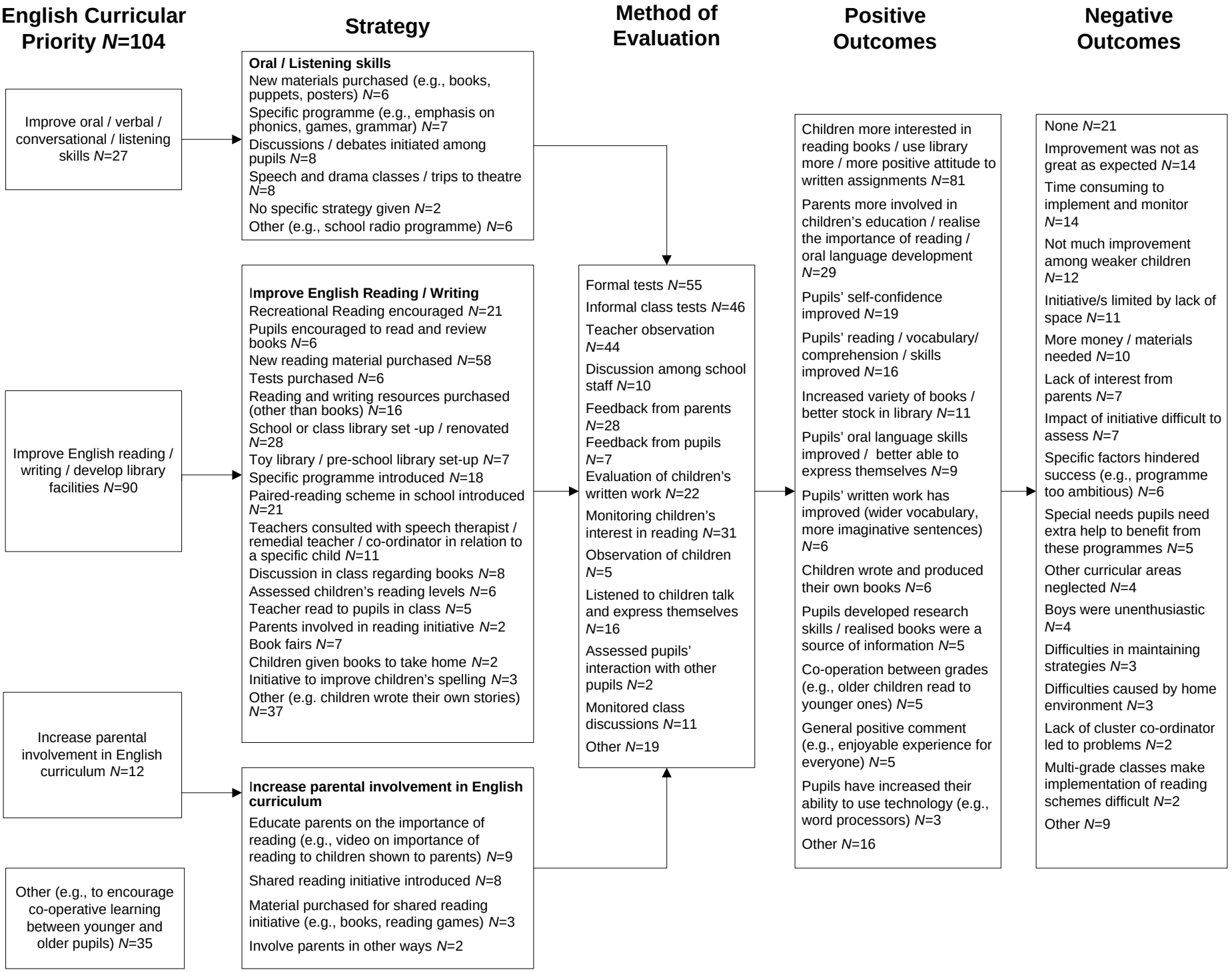


Figure 2.4. Number of principals in 2001 reporting various English priorities, types of strategies used to achieve objectives associated with the priorities, methods of evaluating the strategies, and positive and negative outcomes of the strategies.

As can be seen in Figure 2.4 and Table 2.11, the majority of principals (87%) reported that their objective was to improve pupils' reading and writing abilities. However, schools varied in terms of the specific skills they hoped to improve within this area. For example, some schools planned to make reading more enjoyable and to encourage more reading for pleasure, while others strove to increase pupils' confidence in their reading ability, or expand reading content, and set up libraries. Still others emphasised facilitating the development of spelling and writing skills, and indeed, many schools mentioned a combination of these aims.

The second most common priority emphasised strengthening pupils' oral and listening skills (26%). Increasing parental involvement was specified as an English curriculum priority by 12% of principals. Finally, a number of objectives were classified as 'other'. For example, four principals said that their aim was to boost the confidence and self-esteem of pupils through initiatives in English, while three identified the diagnosis and targeting of students with reading difficulties as their main objective. Other aims included teaching children how to summarise and analyse materials and promoting the development of critical thinking abilities. For example, one principal said that it was important to "encourage children to focus on descriptive details of items in their own environment, e.g., fruit and vegetables".

Table 2.11. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting various English curriculum priorities (*N*=104)*.

Type of priority (aims and objectives)	**Number (%)**
Improve English reading / writing / develop library	90 (87%)
Improve oral / verbal / conversational / listening skills	27 (26%)
Increase parental involvement in English	12 (12%)
Other (e.g., Diagnosing learning difficulties, increasing self-esteem)	35 (34%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 104 as respondents provided more than one response.

Principals were asked to state the *strategies* their school employed to achieve the aims associated with their English curriculum priorities. Table 2.12 illustrates the main types of strategies utilised by schools to achieve their objective of improving pupils' reading and writing skills.

Table 2.12. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting various types of strategies to achieve their objective of improving pupils' reading and writing skills (*N*=90)*.

Strategy	**Number (%)**
New reading material purchased	58 (64.4%)
School or class library set up / renovated / promoted	28 (31.1%)
Parents involved in reading initiative	26 (28.9%)
Paired reading scheme introduced in school	21 (23.3%)
Recreational reading encouraged	21 (23.3%)
Specific programme introduced	18 (20%)
Reading and writing resources purchased (other than books)	16 (17.8%)
Teachers consulted with speech therapist / remedial teacher / co-ordinator in relation to a specific child	11 (12.2%)
Discussion in class regarding books	8 (8.9%)
Book fairs	7 (7.8%)
Toy library / pre-school library set up	7 (7.8%)
Pupils encouraged to read and review books	6 (6.7%)
Tests purchased	6 (6.7%)
Assessed children's reading levels	6 (6.7%)
Teacher to read to pupils	5 (5.6%)
Initiative to improve children's spelling	3 (3.3%)
Children given books to take home	2 (2.2%)
Other (e.g., staff meetings, games, expert visits)	37 (35.6%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 90 as respondents provided more than one response.

It appears that one of the most common strategies involved purchasing new resources, including reading materials (64.4%), tests (6.7%), and reading and writing resources other than books (17.8%). Promoting parental involvement (28.9%), establishing a school or class library (31.1%), introducing a paired reading scheme (23.3%), and encouraging recreational reading (23.3%) were also among the most popular strategies for improving pupils' reading and writing skills. Other strategies involved, *inter alia*, discussing books in class (8.9%), introducing a specific programme (20%), and holding book fairs (7.8%). Thirty-five responses were classified as 'other', and included, for example, hosting expert visits, and encouraging children to write their own stories and plays.

To meet the objective of strengthening pupils' oral and listening skills, principals adopted strategies such as encouraging discussions and debates among pupils (29.6%), exposing children to drama and speech classes and trips to the theatre (29.6%), and purchasing new materials (22.2%) (Table 2.13). A quarter indicated that the school introduced specific programmes, while two principals did not specify a strategy. Finally, six responses were categorised as 'other', and included, for example, encouraging parents to talk to their children.

Table 2.13. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting various types of strategies to achieve their objective of improving oral / verbal / conversational / skills (*N*=27).

Strategy	**Number (%)**
Discussions / debates initiated among pupils	8 (29.6%)
Speech and drama classes / trips to theatre	8 (29.6%)
Specific programmes introduced (e.g., emphasis on phonics, games, grammar)	7 (25.9%)
New materials purchased (e.g., books, puppets, posters)	6 (22.2%)
No specific strategy given	2 (7.4%)
Other (e.g., school radio programme)	6 (22.2%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 27 as respondents provided more than one response.

Finally, specific strategies for increasing parental involvement in English included the introduction of a paired reading scheme (66.6%), as well as educating parents on the importance of reading, for example by distributing fact sheets, meeting with parents, or giving a video demonstration (75.0%) (Table 2.14). Three schools also listed the purchase of new materials as a means of promoting parental involvement, while two principals suggested other ways of involving parents, such as home visits.

Table 2.14. Number of principals who listed promotion of parental involvement as an objective, reporting various types of strategy to achieve this aim (*N*=12)*.

Strategy	**Number (%)**
Educating parents on the importance of reading	9 (75.0%)
Shared reading initiative	8 (66.6%)
Purchasing new materials	3 (25.0%)
Involving parents in other ways (e.g., home visits)	2 (16.6%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 12 as respondents provided more than one response.

In addition to outlining their English curriculum objectives and strategies, principals were asked to report on the method of *evaluation* they used to assess the success of the strategies. The range of evaluation techniques reported by principals are presented in Table 2.15.

Table 2.15. Number of principals reporting various types of techniques for evaluating the success of attempts to achieve English curriculum priorities in 2000/01 (*N*=104)*.

Method of evaluation	**Number (%)**
Formal / standardised tests	55 (52.9%)
Informal tests	46 (44.2%)
Teacher observation	44 (42.3%)
Monitoring children's interest in reading	31 (29.8%)
Feedback from parents	28 (26.9%)
Evaluation of children's written work	22 (21.2%)
Listening to children talk and express themselves	16 (15.3%)
Monitoring class discussions	11 (10.6%)
Discussion among school staff	10 (9.6%)
Feedback from pupils	7 (6.7%)
Observation of children	5 (4.8%)
Assessment of pupils' interaction with other pupils	2 (1.9%)
Other (e.g., interschool discussions)	19 (18.3%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 104 as respondents provided more than one response.

Formal and informal tests were used by a large number of schools to assess the success of their strategies (52.9% and 44.2%, respectively). Other methods of assessing children's progress included monitoring their interest in reading (29.8%), evaluating their written work (21.2%), listening to children talk and express themselves (15.3%), monitoring class discussions (10.6%), assessing how pupils interact with others (1.9%), or generally observing the children (4.8%). Teachers were also an important element of the evaluation strategy, as 42.3% of principals used teachers' observations, and 9.6% employed staff discussions. Another common evaluation technique involved consulting parents' and pupils' opinions (26.9% and 6.7%, respectively). Finally, 19 responses were coded as 'other', and included methods such as interschool discussions.

As the 2000/01 Planning Questionnaire was completed towards the end of the pilot phase of the initiative, two additional items regarding the *positive and negative outcomes* of the strategies were included. The most frequent positive outcome reported by principals (*n*=81) was that children's interest in reading and writing, and their library use had increased (Table 2.16). For example, one principal noted:

> Pupils were very enthusiastic about their reading- many wanted to spend more time with their library books. Some pupils had asked parents and relatives to buy them more books as birthday or Christmas presents. Children visited the local library more often…Some children exchanged their own books with their friends.

A positive reaction from parents was also noted by over a quarter of principals. According to one principal:

> …Parents were enthusiastic when shown the paired reading video, and did read with their child and undertook the approaches as outlined in the video. They were delighted to see availability of resources for children and became very involved with the paired reading and enjoyed the stories themselves….

Other positive outcomes related to pupils' performance and included an increase in pupils' self-confidence (*n*=19), improvement in pupils' reading, vocabulary, and comprehension skills (*n*=16), development of pupils' research skills (*n*=5), and pupils' increased ability to use technology (*n*=3).

Table 2.16. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting positive outcomes of strategies employed to meet English curriculum priorities (*N*=104)*.

Positive outcomes	**Number (%)**
Children more interested in reading books / use library more / more positive attitude to written assignments	81 (77.9%)
Parents more involved in children's education / realise the importance of reading / oral language development	29 (27.9%)
Pupils' self-confidence increased	19 (18.3%)
Pupils' reading / vocabulary / comprehension skills improved	16 (15.4%)
Increased variety of books in library	11 (10.6%)
Pupils' oral language skills improved	9 (8.7%)
Pupils' written work improved (e.g., wider vocabulary, more imaginative)	6 (5.8%)
Children wrote and produced their own books	6 (5.8%)
Pupils developed research tools	5 (4.8%)
Co-operation between grades	5 (4.8%)
General positive comment	5 (4.8%)
Pupils have increased their ability to use technology	3 (2.9%)
Other	16 (15.4%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 104 as respondents provided more than one response.

When asked to describe negative outcomes of the strategies, one-fifth of all principals indicated that there were no negative outcomes whatsoever (Table 2.17). However, 14 principals indicated that pupils' improvement was not as great as expected, while a further 12 felt that weaker children had not shown much progress. For example, one principal commented:

> Towards the end of the year, interest in borrowing books declined - fine weather maybe? Though reading books increased (and desire to borrow books and read), not sure if this has translated itself into a better grasp of English vocabulary, or increased descriptive / expressive vocabulary. Children of all ages choose books that are below their chronological age…perhaps it's a beginning- they may challenge themselves more in years to come.

Practical factors, such as time and space constraints, and a lack of interest were also seen to limit the success of the initiative.

Table 2.17. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting negative outcomes of strategies employed to meet English curriculum priorities (*N*=104)*.

Negative Outcomes	**Number (%)**
None	21 (20.2%)
Improvement was not as great as expected	14 (13.5%)
Time consuming to implement and monitor	14 (13.5%)
Not much improvement among weak children	12 (11.5%)
Initiatives limited by lack of space	11 (10.6%)
More money / materials needed	10 (9.6%)
Lack of interest from parents	7 (6.7%)
Impact of initiatives difficult to assess	7 (6.7%)
Specific factors hindered success (e.g., programme too ambitious)	6 (5.8%)
Special needs pupils need extra help to benefit from these programmes	5 (4.8%)
Other curriculum areas neglected	4 (3.9%)
Boys were unenthusiastic	4 (3.9%)
Difficulties in maintaining strategies	3 (2.9%)
Difficulties caused by home environment	3 (2.9%)
Lack of cluster co-ordinator led to problems	2 (1.9%)
Multi-grade classes make implementation of reading schemes difficult	2 (1.9%)
Other	9 (8.7%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 104 as respondents provided more than one response.

Although the comparison that could be made between results in 1997/98 and 2000/01 was limited, some tentative conclusions can be drawn from a review of principals' comments regarding their English curriculum priorities in both years. First, not only did a large proportion of principals in both 1997/98 and 2000/01 describe English as a curriculum priority, but the results also indicate a continued emphasis on reading and writing over the last five years (84% in 1997/98 vs. 87% in 2000/01). Indeed, it is possible that schools focused on the area of English, and in particular on reading and writing, because these abilities are fundamental in the learning of many other skills. For example, to learn to solve Mathematical equations, one usually needs to be able to *read* the Mathematical problems. Thus, it is not surprising that many schools appear to have focused on equipping pupils with these important life skills.

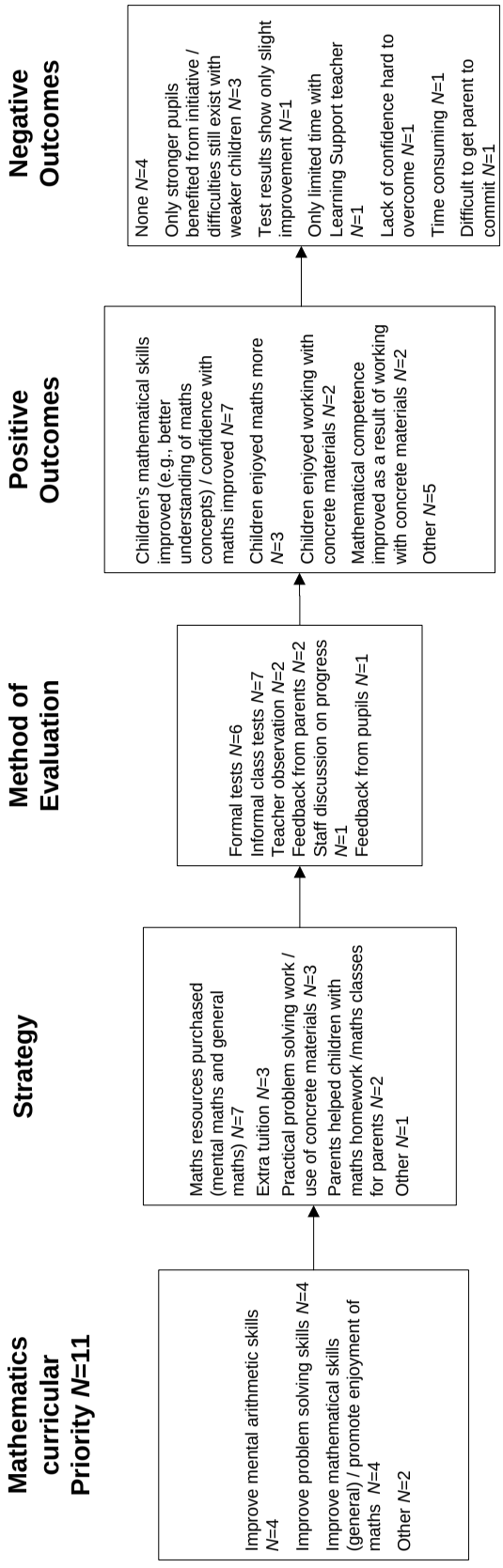
Increasing parental involvement in English also appeared to remain an important element of the English curriculum priority (15.8% in 1997/98 vs. 12% in 2000/01). That promoting parental involvement was also mentioned by many principals in both years as a *strategy* is indicative of the value that schools placed on parental involvement.

Overall, the fact that 20.2% of principals in 2000/01 felt that there were no negative outcomes, and that three-quarters indicated positive changes in pupils' reading and writing suggests that schools, for the most part, have been successful in achieving their English curriculum priorities.

2.3. MATHEMATICS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES IN 2000/2001

In 2000/01, eleven principals detailed a Mathematics curriculum priority. Figure 2.5 presents these priorities, along with the strategies employed to achieve the objectives associated with them, the methods of evaluating the strategies, and the positive and negative outcomes of the strategies.

Figure 2.5. Number of principals in 2001 reporting various Mathematics priorities, types of strategies used to achieve objectives associated with the priorities, methods of evaluating the strategies, and positive and negative outcomes of the strategies.



Of the 11 principals who described a Mathematics curriculum priority in 2000/01, four identified improving mental arithmetic skills as a specific aim, four focused on strengthening problem solving skills, and four emphasised improving Mathematical skills in general, and four promoting enjoyment of Mathematics. Two responses were classified as 'other', and included for example:

> child should be enabled to identify positive and negative numbers…explore simple rules on brackets and priority of operation.

When asked which strategies were employed to meet the objectives associated with their Mathematics curriculum priorities, seven principals said that Mathematics resources were purchased, three offered extra tuition, three used concrete materials and practical problem solving work, and two reported involving parents (Table 2.18).

Table 2.18. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting various strategies to be used in addressing Mathematics curriculum priorities (*N*=11)*.

Strategy	**Number**	**%**
Mathematics resources purchased	7	63.6%
Extra tuition	3	27.3%
Practical problem solving work / use of concrete materials	3	27.3%
Parents helped children with Mathematics homework / Mathematics classes for parents	2	18.2%
Other	1	9.1%

*Numbers sum to greater than 11 as respondents provided more than one response.

Several methods of evaluation were used to assess the effectiveness of strategies (Table 2.19). Informal class tests were the most popular modes of evaluation (*n*=7), followed by formal tests (*n*=6), teacher observations (*n*=2), feedback from parents (*n*=2), staff discussions on progress (*n*=1), and feedback from pupils (*n*=1).

Table 2.19. Number of principals reporting various types of techniques for evaluating the success of attempts to meet objectives within Mathematics curriculum priorities in 2000/01 (*N*=11)*.

Method of evaluation	**Number (%)**
Informal class tests	7 (63.4%)
Formal / standardised tests	6 (54.6%)
Teacher observation	2 (18.2%)
Feedback from parents	2 (18.2%)
Staff discussion on progress	1 (9.1%)
Feedback from pupils	1 (9.1%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 11 as respondents provided more than one response.

As was the case with the English curriculum priorities, the outcomes of the strategies associated with the Mathematics curriculum priorities were in the main positive, with 36% of principals saying there were no negative outcomes. Indeed, a majority (63.6%) said that children's Mathematical skills and their confidence in Mathematics had improved, and a quarter that children enjoyed Mathematics more. For example, one principal noted that:

> Parents are now more aware of activities they can do with their children at home and educational materials they can purchase. Pupils more aware of *language* of problem-solving.

However, over a quarter of principals also felt that only the stronger pupils benefited from the initiative, with the weaker pupils still demonstrating difficulties in Mathematics (Table 2.20 and 2.21). According to one principal:

> Tests results would indicate that difficulties still exist in the area of Maths problem-solving, especially amongst less able pupils.

Table 2.20. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting positive outcomes of strategies employed to address Mathematics curriculum priorities (*N*=11)*.

Positive outcomes	**Number (%)**
Improvement in children's Mathematical skills (e.g., better understanding of Mathematics concepts) / increased confidence in Mathematics	7 (63.6%)
Children enjoyed Mathematics more	3 (27.3%)
Children enjoyed working with concrete materials	2 (18.2%)
Mathematical competence improved as a result of working with concrete materials	2 (18.2%)
Other	5 (45.5%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 11 as respondents provided more than one response.

Table 2.21. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting negative outcomes of strategies employed to address Mathematics curriculum priorities (*N*=11)*.

Negative outcomes	**Number (%)**
None	4 (36%)
Only stronger pupils benefited from the initiative / difficulties still exist with weaker children	3 (27.3%)
Test results show only slight improvement	1 (9.1%)
Time consuming	1 (9.1%)
Other (e.g., Lack of confidence hard to overcome, limited time with learning support teacher, difficult to get parents to commit)	3 (27.3%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 11 as respondents provided more than one response.

Although it is difficult to compare the 2000/01 findings with the results from the 1997/98 questionnaire, some limited conclusions can be drawn from a review of responses in both years.

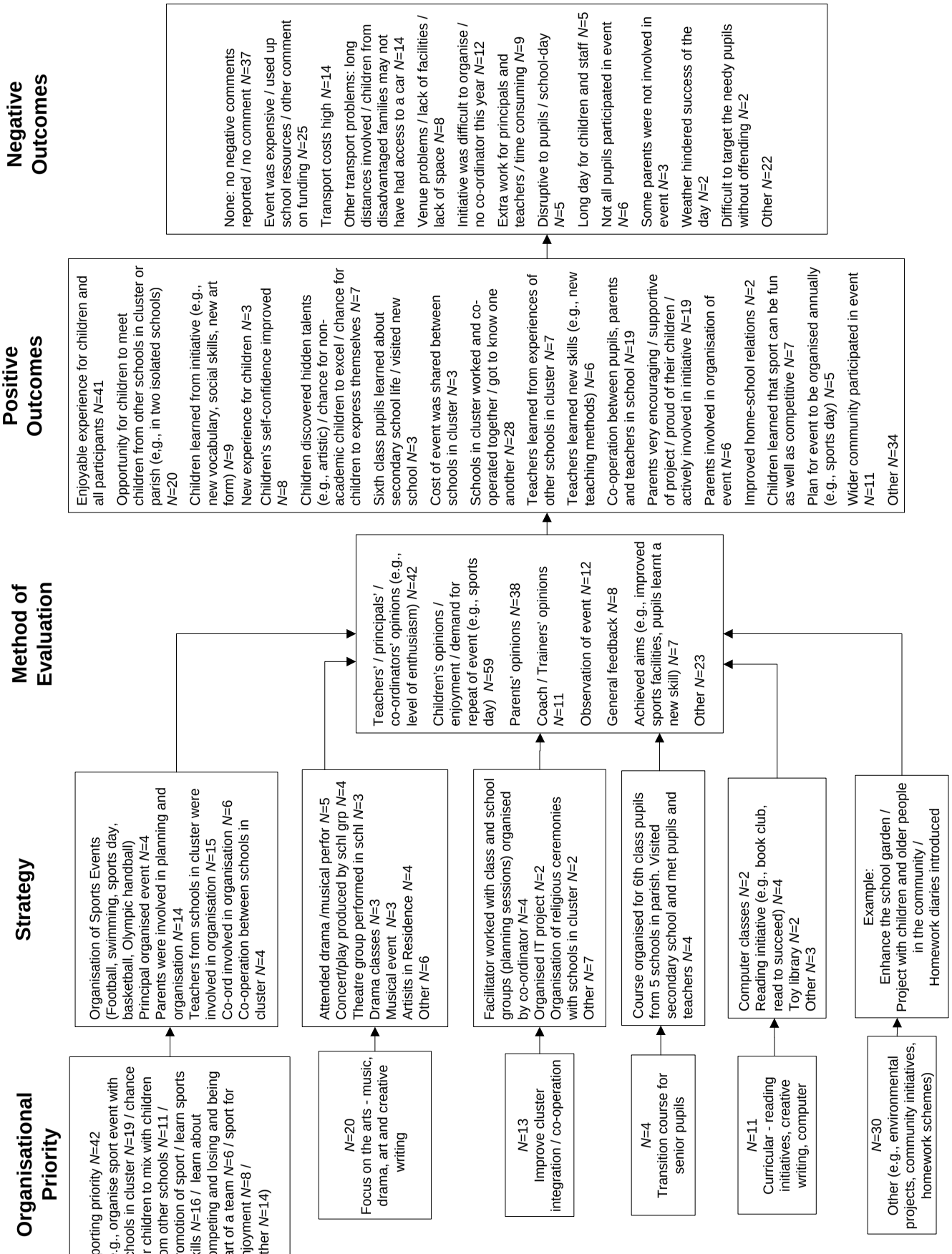
First, the main objectives for the Mathematics curriculum priorities appear to have remained stable over the five years, as principals in both years said that, in addition to making Mathematics more enjoyable, they wished to strengthen pupils' mental Mathematics and problem solving skills. Furthermore, while the practical use of concrete materials was mentioned as a *priority* by four principals in 1997/98, the use of practical and concrete materials was listed as a *strategy* by three principals in 2000/01, suggesting that this was also an important element of the Mathematics curriculum priority in both years. Similarly, the purchase of new equipment and the involvement of parents remained popular strategies for achieving Mathematics curriculum priorities in both 1997/98 and 2000/01.

With regard to the evaluation of these strategies, the most commonly used techniques for both the English and Mathematics curriculum areas in 2000/01 were formal and informal tests. This represents a shift from 1997/98, where staff discussion and consulting parents were the most commonly employed methods. That a majority of schools employed formal testing methods in 2000/01 suggests that schools benefited from the in-service training, which stressed the importance of using formal testing to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies. The use by many schools of a combination of evaluation techniques suggests that schools appreciated the importance of gathering accurate and comprehensive information when evaluating their progress.

2.4. ORGANISATIONAL PRIORITIES IN 2000/20001

Of the 116 principals who returned the 2000/01 Planning Questionnaires, all provided details of their school's organisational priority, with four describing more than one priority. Principals' descriptions of their school's organisational priorities in 2000/01 are outlined in Figure 2.6.

Figure 2.6 Number of principals in 2001 reporting various organisational priorities, types of strategies used to achieve objectives associated with the priorities, methods of evaluating the strategies, and positive and negative outcomes of the strategies.



As can be seen in Figure 2.6, principals reported a range of objectives associated with their organisational priorities. The main types of objectives are reported in Table 2.22.

Table 2.22. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting various categories of aims and objectives associated with their organisational priorities (*N*=116)*.

Type of priority (aims and objectives)	**Number**
Sporting priority e.g., Organise sport event with schools in cluster (*n*=19), promotion of sport / learn sports skills (*n*=16), chance for children to mix with children from other schools (*n*=11), learn about competing and losing and being part of a team (*n*=6), sport enjoyment (*n*=8), other (*n*=14).	*n*=42
Focus on the Arts - music, drama, art, and creative writing	*n*=20
Improve cluster integration / co-operation	*n*=13
Curriculum - reading initiatives, creative writing, computer	*n*=11
Transition course for senior pupils	*n*=4
Other (e.g., environmental projects, community initiatives, homework schemes)	*n*=30

*Numbers sum to greater than 116 as respondents provided more than one response.

The most popular organisational priority identified in 2000/01 related to sporting events (36.2%). The specific aims within this area varied somewhat, with almost half of those who named sport as a priority indicating that they had organised sports events with other schools in their cluster, while 38% promoted the learning of sports skills. A quarter of schools whose priority was sport felt that it was a chance for children to mix with children from other schools; 14.3% wanted children to learn about competing and playing as part of a team, and 19% promoted sport for enjoyment.

The next most common organisational priority reported by principals was a focus on Arts (16.7%). For example, one principal stated that by promoting an active interest in Drama, the school hoped to:

> Give children an opportunity to meet with each other in a situation where rivalry didn't exist….To teach children to deal with their limitations. To develop self-expression, self-esteem…self-reliance and trust outside their school environment.

The third most popular priority involved improvements to cluster integration and co-operation (10.8%). For example, according to one principal, promoting integration within the cluster would serve to:

> …reduce the level of isolation that is experienced in two teacher schools. To assist the children in their communication skills with children from other schools- many of whom they will meet in 2nd level- thus alleviating the fear of going into a new environment...

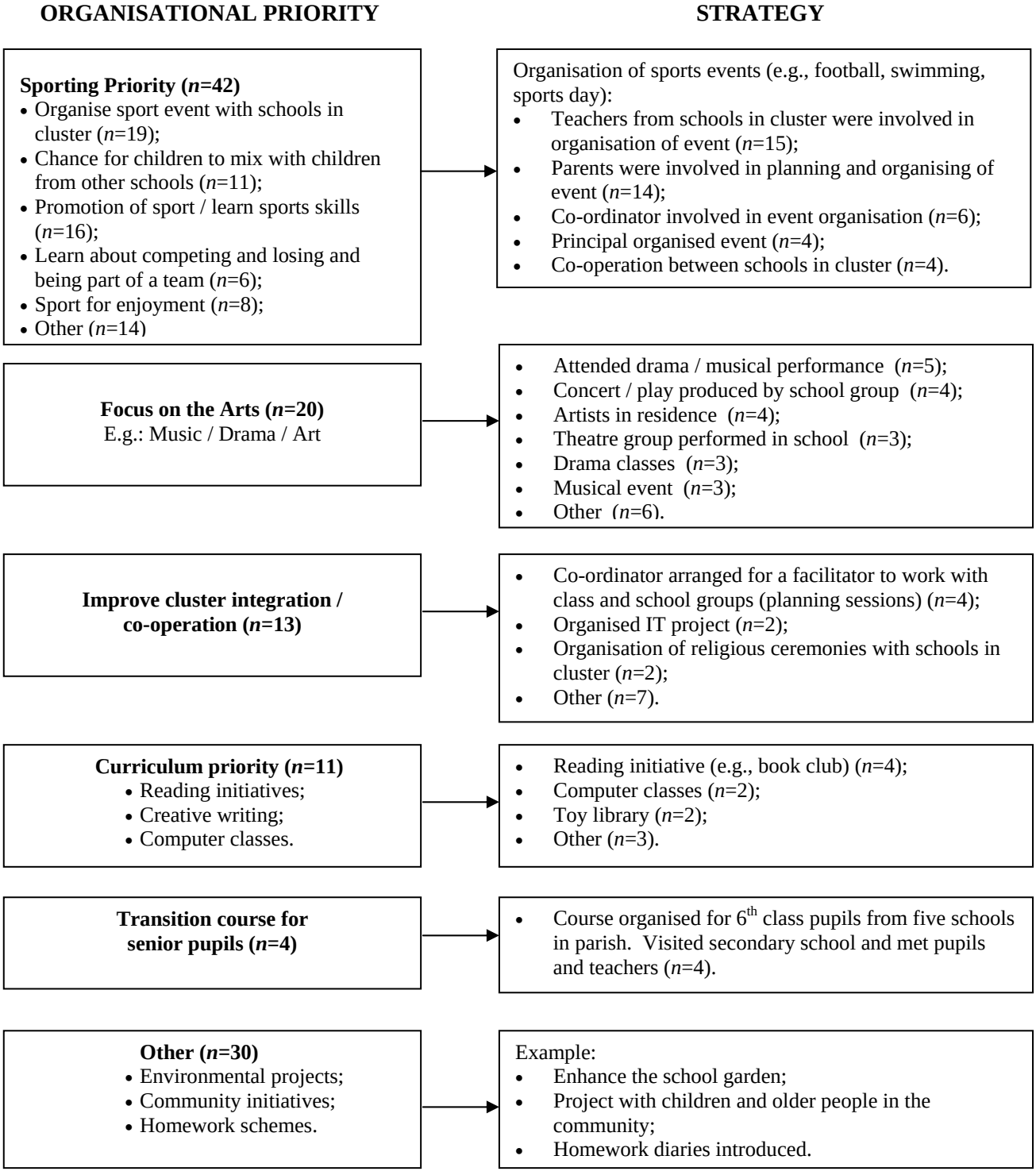
Eleven principals (9.2%) described curriculum aims as their organisational priority. For example:

> Schools in cluster to compile a book on one theme - to develop children's creative skills, to cultivate co-operation and communication within cluster…to encourage positive parental involvement.

Establishing transition courses for senior pupils was cited as an aim by four principals, while 30 priorities were classified as 'other', and included, for example, environmental projects and homework schemes.

The main types of *strategies* that schools used to address their organisational priorities varied depending on the type of priority. Figure 2.8 presents the strategies associated with the various organisational priorities.

FIGURE 2.8. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting various organisational priorities and types of strategies used to achieve objectives associated with priorities (*N*=116)*.



The main strategies schools used to achieve their sporting priority simply involved organising sporting events, such as football and swimming. Fourteen schools included parents, 15 included teachers, and six included co-ordinators in the planning and organising of events. In four schools the principal organised the event, while a further four promoted co-operation between schools in the cluster.

Of those schools whose priority was to focus on Arts, five attended drama and musical performances, while three invited theatre groups to perform in the school, and four had school groups produce a concert or play. Other specified strategies comprised drama classes (*n*=3) and musical events (*n*=3), as well as employing artists in residence (*n*=4).

To meet their organisational objective of improving cluster integration and co-operation, two schools organised an IT project, while another two organised religious ceremonies with other schools in their cluster. In four schools, a co-ordinator organised planning sessions, which involved bringing in a facilitator to work with the class and school. A further seven principals described strategies which were classified as 'other'. For example, one principal described how:

> Teachers from cluster met- planned day's activities with co-ordinator. Venues selected and booked…Children arranged in groups- mingling pupils from all schools in each group…Parents enlisted for the day.

Strategies adopted by schools who described curriculum initiatives as their organisational priority included introducing computer classes (*n*=2), launching reading initiatives, such as book clubs (*n*=4), and establishing a toy library (*n*=2). Finally, the schools that aimed to introduce a transition course for senior pupils organised a course for 6th class pupils, which entailed visits to secondary schools to meet pupils and teachers.

Principals also reported a variety of methods for *evaluating* the effectiveness of the strategies associated with their school's organisational priority (Table 2.23).

Table 2.23. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting various types of methods for evaluating the success of their school's organisational strategies (*N*=116)*.

Method of evaluation	**Number**	**%**
Children's opinions / enjoyment / demand for repeat of event	59	50.9%
Teachers' / principals' / co-ordinators' opinions	42	36.2%
Parents' opinions	38	32.8%
Observation of event	12	10.3%
Coach / trainers' opinions	11	9.5%
General feedback	8	6.9%
Achieved aims (e.g., improved sports facilities, pupils learned new skill)	7	6.0%
Other	23	19.8%

*Numbers sum to greater than 116 as respondents provided more than one response.

Over half of principals said that children's opinions were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy, while 36.2% used teachers', principals' and co-ordinators' opinions, 32.8% sought parents' opinions, and 9.5% consulted coaches and trainers. These results are not surprising, given that many of the objectives related to organising events, such as sports games, educational courses, and secondary school visits. Twelve schools (10.3%) also used observation of the event as an indicator of the success or failure of the strategy. Other evaluation methods involved considering general feedback, and determining if aims were achieved. A further 23 specified modes of evaluation were classified as 'other'. For example, in describing how the school evaluated their priority, which involved compiling a book with other schools in the cluster, one principal noted:

> Pupils very definite about overall aim. Major discussion and debate on turns and twists of story. Co-operation between group eventually reached to achieve results. Re-writes after much deliberation. Peer pressure at its best! Regular Internet links with other schools. Children were very anxious to read other children's work. Great excitement and buzz about the whole thing…

As the 2000/01 questionnaire was completed towards the end of the five-year initiative, it provided an ideal opportunity to seek information on the outcomes of the various strategies that schools employed to address their organisational priorities. The positive and negative outcomes reported by principals varied considerably, which is not surprising given that the priorities themselves were quite varied. The positive and negative outcomes are presented in Table 2.24 and Table 2.25, respectively.

Table 2.24. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting positive outcomes of strategies employed to address their organisational priorities (*N*=116)*.

Positive outcomes	**Number**	**%**
Enjoyable experience for children and all participants	41	35.3%
Schools in cluster worked and co-operated together / cost of event was shared between schools in cluster	31	26.7%
Parents very encouraging / supportive of project / proud of children /actively involved in initiative	25	21.6%
Opportunity for children to meet children from other schools in cluster or parish	20	17.2%
Co-operation between pupils, parents, and teachers in school	19	16.4%
Children learned from initiative (e.g., new vocabulary, social skills)	16	13.8%
Wider community participated in event	11	9.4%
Children's self-confidence improved	8	6.9%
Children discovered hidden talents (e.g., artistic) / chance for non-academic children to excel / chance for children to express themselves	7	6.0%
Teachers learned from experiences of other schools in cluster / teachers learned new skills	13	11.2%
Plan for event to be organised annually (e.g., sports day)	5	4.3%
Sixth class pupils learned about secondary school life	3	2.6%
New experience for children	3	2.6%
Improved home-school relations	2	1.7%
Other	34	29.3%

*Numbers sum to greater than 116 as respondents provided more than one response.

In many cases, strategies were considered to have benefited the children participating in the scheme. For example, 35.3% of principals noted that children and all participants had an enjoyable experience, while 17.2% felt that the initiative gave children an opportunity to meet other children from the cluster or parish, and 13.8% said that children had 'learned' from the initiative. A further eight principals said that children's self-confidence had improved, while seven said that children had discovered hidden talents or had been given an opportunity to express themselves. For example, one principal reported:

> …*Hoppee the Rabbit* launch took place…Parents, children, teachers and priests involved. Book printed and produced on CD. Great get-together for all children involved. Each child received a copy of the book. Book read very enthusiastically by the rest of the children in our school. Children very, very proud of their achievement.

Thirteen principals (11.2%) observed that teachers had also learned new skills. Co-operation among participants in the scheme was also listed as a positive outcome. For example, over a quarter of respondents said that schools in the cluster had worked together, while 16.4% reported co-operation between pupils, parents and teachers, and eleven principals remarked that the wider community had participated in events.

Table 2.25. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting negative outcomes of strategies employed to meet organisational priorities (*N*=116)*.

Negative outcomes	**Number (%)**
None	37 (31.9%)
Comments on funding (e.g., Event was expensive / transport costs high)	39 (33.6%)
Other transport problems (e.g., long distances involved / children from disadvantaged families lack access to car)	14 (12.1%)
Venue problems / lack of facilities / lack of space	8 (6.9%)
Initiative was difficult to organise / no co-ordinator this year	12 (10.4%)
Extra work for principals and teachers / time consuming	9 (7.6%)
Not all pupils participated in the event	6 (5.2%)
Disruptive to pupils / school-day	5 (4.3%)
Long day for children and staff	5 (4.3%)
Some parents were not involved in event	3 (2.6%)
Weather hindered success of the day	2 (1.7%)
Difficult to target those pupils most in need without offending them	2 (1.7%)
Other	22 (19.0%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 116 as respondents provided more than one response.

Many of the negative outcomes reported by principals related to practical factors, and included, for example, lack of funding (33.6%), difficulty in accessing transport (12.1%), time constraints (7.6%), lack of space (6.9%), or problems with the weather (1.7%) (Table 2.25). For example, one principal stated:

> … At the moment, we can't produce any concerts as the only hall in the area has fallen into disrepair and is not safe for us to use. For the past 2 years we have done a pageant each Christmas in the church and the entire community are invited. We would still like to do some concerts if we had a suitable venue.

Lack of involvement of parents (2.6%) and pupils (5.2%), and difficulties targeting the pupils most in need without offending them (1.7%) were also reported to be factors which hindered the success of the strategies. Despite this, 31.9% of principals reported no negative outcomes. This finding, combined with the number of positive outcomes reported, suggests that overall, the strategies implemented to meet the objectives associated with schools' organisational priorities were successful. However, it is likely that resolving some of the practical factors raised by principals would serve to enhance the effectiveness of the strategies.

While the differences in coding limited the conclusions that could be drawn from a comparison of the 1997/98 and 2000/01 responses, it did appear that schools' organisational priorities changed over the five years of the scheme. The fact that many of the organisational priorities in 1997/98 related to issues such as school management and communication, staff development, and sourcing additional resources, suggests that various administrative problems required extra attention at the outset of the scheme. However, it seems likely that many of these issues were resolved as the scheme evolved, as the 2000/01 organisational priorities tended to focus on pupils' needs, emphasising, for example, development in the areas of sports, Arts, and other curriculum areas.

The results also indicate that the strategies employed to address the organisational priorities were altered accordingly. That is, while strategies in 1997/98 tended to involve administrative activities, for example fundraising, or holding meetings with school staff, co-ordinators, Boards of Management, and other schools in the cluster, strategies in 2000/01 generally entailed organising events and courses for students.

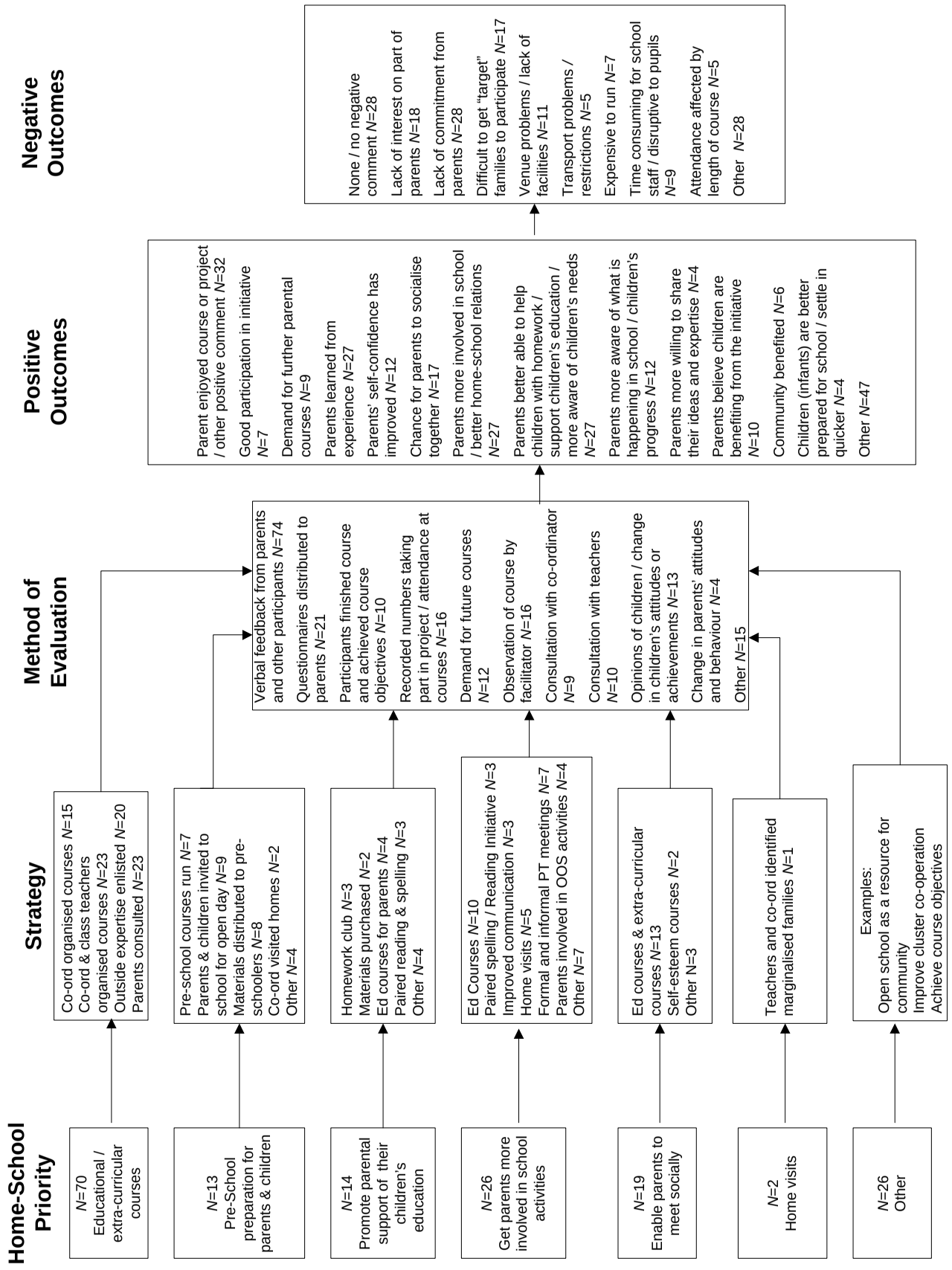
It would appear that evaluation methods were also modified between 1997/98 and 2000/01. Because the main organisational priorities and strategies in 2000/01 involved organising activities for pupils, it is not surprising that the most common method of evaluation in 2000/01 involved consulting children. However, parents' and teachers' opinions continued to be a popular resource for evaluating the success of strategies.

Thus, it would seem that schools' organisational objectives were adapted as the scheme evolved, and strategies and evaluation methods were tailored to fit changes in priorities. For the most part, schools' five-year plans appear to have been flexible, rather than fixed and rigid.

2.5. HOME-SCHOOL PRIORITIES IN 2000/2001

In 2000/01, 116 principals provided details about their home-school priority. Figure 2.7 provides an overview of principals' descriptions of these priorities.

Figure 2.7. Number of principals in 2001 reporting various home-school priorities, types of strategies used to achieve objectives associated with the priorities, methods of evaluating the strategies, and positive and negative outcomes of the strategies.



Most principals in 2000/01 reported more than one home-school priority. The objectives are listed in Table 2.26.

Table 2.26. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting various categories of aims and objectives associated with their home-school priority (*N*=116)*.

Type of priority (aims and objectives)	**Number (%)**
Provide educational / extra-curricular courses for parents	70 (60.3%)
Get parents more involved in school activities	26 (22.4%)
Enable parents to meet socially	19 (16.4%)
Promote parental support of their children's education	14 (12.1%)
Pre-school preparation for parents and children	13 (11.2%)
Home visits	2 (1.7%)
Other	26 (22.4%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 116 as respondents provided more than one response.

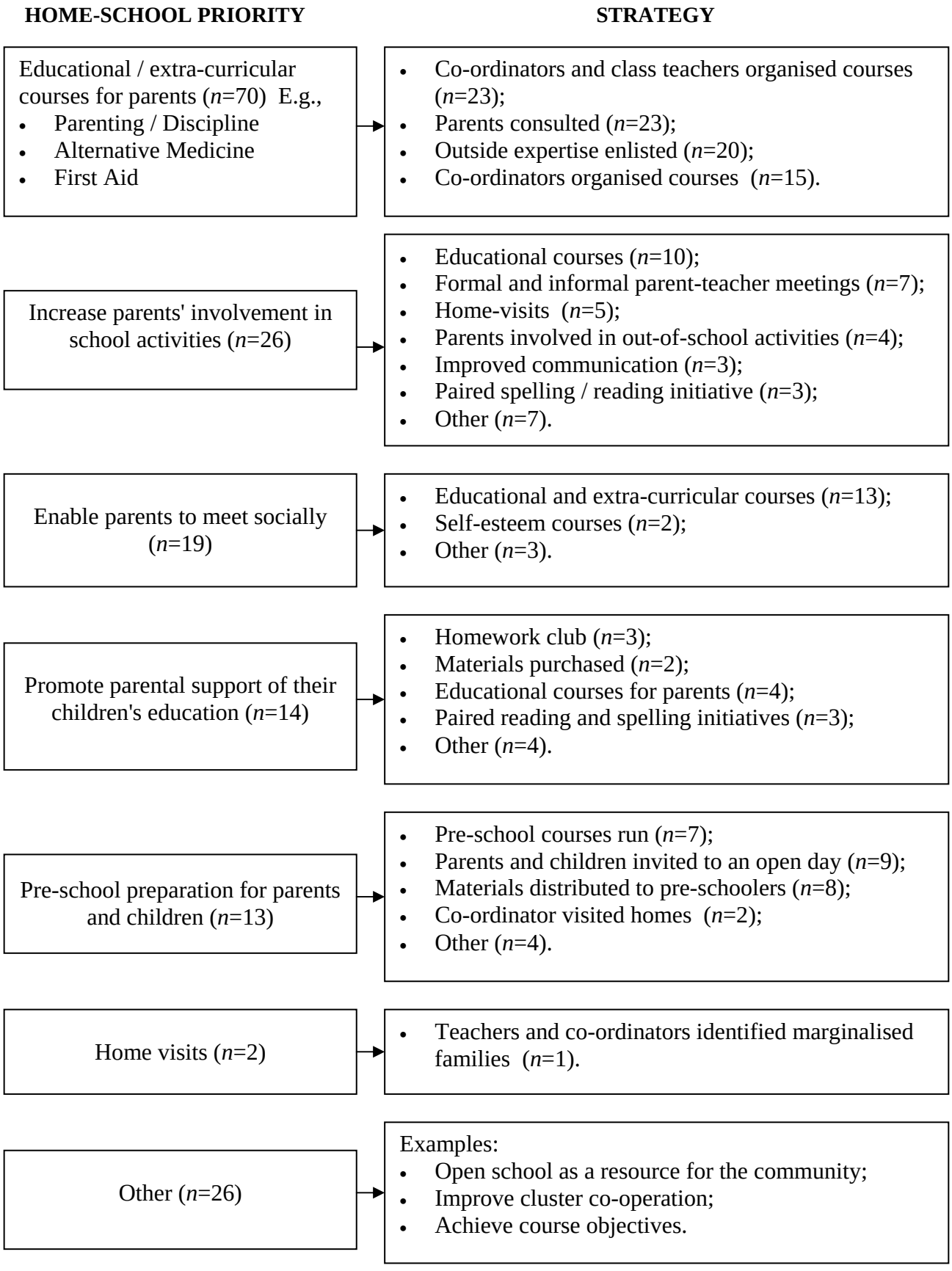
The most frequently cited home-school priority related to the provision of educational and extra-curricular courses for parents (60.3%). A considerable number of home-school priorities emphasised parents' role in their children's education. Specifically, increasing parental involvement in school activities, enabling parents to meet socially, and promoting parental support of their children's education were common home-school priorities reported by principals (22.4%, 16.4%, and 12.1%, respectively). For example, one principal reported that the school aimed to:

> …involve parents in discussing homework and to hear their views on it. To give teachers an opportunity to share ideas on homework with parents. To know how parents felt about homework. To familiarise parents with school work and to let them know how homework is prepared.

Other priorities included pre-school preparation for children and parents (11.2%), and home-visits (1.7%). Finally, 26 comments, such as "we have no co-ordinator this year" were classified as 'other'.

Schools varied in the *strategies* that they used to address their home-school priorities. Figure 2.9 lists the strategies matched to home-school priorities.

FIGURE 2.9. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting various home-school priorities and types of strategies used to achieve objectives associated with priorities (*N*=116)*.



*Numbers sum to greater than 116 as some principals described more than one home-school priority.

Where principals listed educational and extra-curricular activities as their priority, the strategies involved consulting parents about courses (32.9%) and enlisting outside expertise, such as a computer instructor (28.6%). Courses were also organised by co-ordinators, principals and class teachers. For example, one principal described how:

> Co-ordinator, teachers and parents evaluated needs. In response, co-ordinator contacted VEC re: funding and availability of tutor. Two schools from cluster joined and venue selected.

The main types of strategies schools adopted to get parents more involved in school activities comprised introducing educational courses, for example, parenting, aerobics, and first aid classes (38.5%), holding formal and informal parent-teacher meetings (26.9%), conducting home visits (19.2%), establishing paired spelling and reading initiatives (11.5%), improving communication (11.5%), and involving parents in out-of-school activities (11.5%). Seven responses were difficult to classify and were categorised as 'other'.

Strategies employed to enable parents to meet socially were similar to those above, and included educational and extra-curricular courses, such as cookery and computer courses (68.4%) and self-esteem courses (10.5%). Three responses were classified as 'other', and included, for example, holding a coffee morning for parents of pre-school children.

To promote parental support of their children's education, 28.5% of schools introduced educational courses for parents, while 21.4% reported establishing home-work clubs. A further 21.4% employed paired reading and spelling initiatives, while 14.2% purchased new materials.

To address the priority relating to pre-school preparation for children and parents, a majority of schools (69.2%) had invited parents and children to an open day. Eight principals (61.5%) also indicated that materials, such as toys, were distributed to pre-schoolers, while over half indicated running pre-school courses. According to one principal:

> Parents (were) invited to school…The children and parents worked on various activities- jigsaws, sorting, classifying together and stories. Co-ordinator explained the importance of praising their child and showed how a story may be read, making reference to all the language development in pictures, etc.

Finally, two principals (15.4%) reported that co-ordinators conducted home visits, and four responses, were classified as 'other'.

Where the priority was home-visits, the strategy entailed teachers and co-ordinators identifying marginalised families. Finally, strategies varied for those priorities that were classified as 'other', and included for example, opening the school as a resource for the community, or improving cluster co-operation.

As was the case in 1997/98, there appeared to be considerable overlap between the home-school priorities and the strategies employed to achieve them in 2000/01. For example, while the most common home-school *priority* related to the provision of educational and extra-curricular courses for parents, introducing educational courses for parents was also cited as a *strategy* for four of the seven

home-school priorities (Figure 2.2). This may explain why the strategies associated with schools' home-school priorities were less diverse than those associated with curriculum and organisational priorities.

Principals also provided details on the methods that were used to *evaluate* the effectiveness of the strategies employed to meet home-school priorities. As most home-school priorities targeted parents and involved introducing educational courses, it is not surprising that the majority of evaluation techniques involved to parents' opinions and feedback about courses (Table 2.27). A majority of schools (63.8%) relied on verbal feedback from parents and other participants, while 18.1% distributed questionnaires to parents, and 3.5% monitored changes in parents' attitudes and behaviour. Attendance at courses and the number of participants who finished the course or achieved the course objectives were also used as indicators of the effectiveness of strategies (13.8% and 8.6%, respectively). Finally, teachers, co-ordinators, and pupils were consulted to assess the success or failure of schools' home-school priorities (8.6%, 7.8% and 11.2%, respectively) .

Table 2.27. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting various types of methods for evaluating the effectiveness of their school's home-school priorities (*N*=116)*.

Method of evaluation	**Number (%)**
Verbal feedback from parents and other participants	74 (63.8%)
Questionnaires distributed to parents	21 (18.1%)
Recorded numbers taking part in project / attendance at courses	16 (13.8%)
Observation of course by facilitator	16 (13.8%)
Opinions of children / change in children's attitudes / or achievements	13 (11.2%)
Demand for future courses	12 (10.3%)
Participants finished course and achieved course objectives	10 (8.6%)
Consultation with teachers	10 (8.6%)
Consultation with co-ordinator	9 (7.8%)
Change in parents' attitudes and behaviour	4 (3.5%)
Other	15 (12.9%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 116 as respondents provided more than one response.

Principals were asked to describe the positive and negative outcomes of their approach to home-school priorities. The majority of positive outcomes related to parents' reactions to the various initiatives (Table 2.28). For example, over a quarter of principals said that parents enjoyed the course, while an equal number (23.3%) said that parents had learned from the experience, had become more

involved in the school, or were better able to support their children's education. As one principal noted:

> Parents commented on the change in attitudes of target children…Some parents began to see how their involvement can make a difference.

Furthermore, 14.7% of principals felt that parents had had an opportunity to socialise together, while 10.4% felt that parents' self-confidence had improved, and that parents' awareness of what was happening in school had increased. A minority of principals were of the opinion that the community had benefited (5.2%), and that infants were better prepared for and settled into school quicker (3.5%).

Table 2.28. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting positive outcomes of strategies employed to address their home-school priorities (*N*=116)*.

Positive outcomes	**Number (%)**
Parents enjoyed course or project / other positive comment	32 (27.6%)
Parents learned from experience	27 (23.3%)
Parents more involved in school / better home school relations	27 (23.3%)
Parents better able to help children with homework / support children's education / more aware of children's needs	27 (23.3%)
Chance for parents to socialise together	17 (14.7%)
Parents' self-confidence has improved	12 (10.4%)
Parents more aware of what is happening in school / children's progress	12 (10.4%)
Parents believe children are benefiting from the initiative	10 (8.6%)
Demand for further parental courses	9 (7.8%)
Good participation in initiative	7 (6.0%)
Community benefited	6 (5.2%)
Parents more willing to share their ideas and expertise	4 (3.5%)
Children (infants) are better prepared for school / settle in quicker	4 (3.5%)
Other	47 (40.5%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 116 as respondents provided more than one response.

When asked about the negative outcomes of the strategies, almost a quarter of the principals indicated that there were none (Table 2.29). However, an equal number of principals considered the lack of commitment from parents problematic, while 15.5% felt that there was a lack of interest from

parents, and 14.7% that it was difficult to involve families who would benefit the most from the courses. For example, one principal reported:

> Difficulty in changing parental attitudes- some parents feel they are not skilled enough to help their child.

Practical factors, such as lack of facilities (9.5%), time constraints (7.8%), high costs (6.0%), and transport restrictions (4.3%) were also perceived to hinder the success of strategies.

Table 2.29. Number of principals in 2000/01 reporting negative outcomes of strategies employed to their home-school priorities (*N*=116)*.

Negative outcomes	**Number**	**%**
None / no negative comment	28	24.1%
Lack of commitment from parents	28	24.1%
Lack of interest on part of parents	18	15.5%
Difficult to get 'target' families to participate	17	14.7%
Venue problems / lack of facilities	11	9.5%
Time consuming for school staff / disruptive to pupils	9	7.8%
Expensive to run	7	6.0%
Transport problems	5	4.3%
Attendance affected by length of course	5	4.3%
Other	28	24.1%

*Numbers sum to greater than 116 as respondents provided more than one response.

Overall, the results suggest that there has been little change in the main home-school priorities since 1997/98. Although the priorities described in 1997/98 were grouped according to more specific categories, it appears that, on the whole, the majority of priorities related to increasing parental involvement in schools, promoting parents' support of their children's education, and enabling parents to meet socially.

The strategies adopted to meet the objectives associated with schools' home-school priorities in 2000/01 also appear to mirror those which schools had intended to use in 1997/98. Specifically, in 1997/98 and in 2000/01, the most popular strategies included getting parents involved in educational and extra-curricular activities and introducing courses for parents. Other strategies employed in both years include home visits, pre-school activities, holding parent-teacher meetings, and lending materials, such as videos and books, for children to take home.

Given that most of the objectives and strategies in both years targeted parents, it is not surprising that parental opinion and feedback was the most favoured method of evaluating the strategies in both years. However, there appeared to be some shift between 1997/98 and 2000/01 in other methods of evaluation. For example, the second and third most common evaluation techniques in 1997/98 involved consulting teachers and co-ordinators. Checking attendance records and consulting pupils were strategies which were used by only a minority of schools in 1997/98.

Conversely, the majority of schools in 2000/01 sought children's opinions and checked attendance records, while only a small proportion sought feedback from teachers and co-ordinators.

While many principals reported positive outcomes in 2000/01, a minority said that practical problems, such as lack of space, transport difficulties, and time constraints, had hindered the effectiveness of strategies. A number of principals also reported a lack of commitment or lack of interest on the part of parents (24.1% and 15.5%, respectively), and 14.7% indicated that they were having difficulty targeting the families they considered to be most in need of help. These findings seem to indicate that while schools' home-school priorities for the most part have been achieved, the strategies might not have had a strong impact on families who would benefit most from the initiative.

2.6. CONCLUSION

Of the 109 respondents who supplied details of curriculum priorities in 1997/98, English was by far the most frequently reported priority, followed by Irish, then Mathematics. The main strategies schools planned to use to achieve their curriculum aims involved buying new materials, involving parents, and developing material to suit the needs of their classes. To evaluate the relative success or failure of a given strategy, schools were most likely to use teachers' opinions, followed by parents' opinions.

Only 77 schools returned details of organisational priorities in 1997/98, with better communication or management within the school the most frequently reported priority. The most frequently reported strategy was to contact parents to enlist their involvement, followed by increasing the number of, or an initiation of, staff meetings. As with curriculum priorities, teachers' opinion was the most frequently reported source of evaluation, followed by parental opinion.

Ninety-seven principals supplied details of their home-school priorities in 1997/98. Encouraging parents to participate more in their children's education in general, or in a specific area, such as reading, were the most frequently reported priorities. The most frequently cited strategies were to set up a Parents' Association, to run courses for parents, and to get parents involved in curricular and extra-curricular activities. To evaluate the success of the strategies, just over half of schools planned to consult parents, while half planned to use teachers' opinions.

Of the 115 principals who supplied details of their school's curriculum priority in 2000/01, 104 described an English curriculum priority and 11 described a Mathematics priority. Improving pupils' reading and writing skills was the most frequently cited English curriculum objective, followed by strengthening pupils' oral and listening skills, and increasing parental involvement. The strategies schools used to achieve these aims varied depending on the particular objective. For example, purchasing new materials and involving parents were two of the key strategies adopted to improve reading and writing skills, while discussions among pupils and speech and drama classes were most often utilised to strengthen pupils' oral and listening skills. Purchasing new materials was the most common strategy to address Mathematics curriculum priorities.

For both curriculum areas, the most common methods of evaluating the success or failure of a given strategy involved using formal and informal tests. For both curriculum areas, principals' reports of the outcomes of the strategies were generally positive, with a majority noting improvements in children's English and Mathematical skills. However, where principals reported negative outcomes, they generally related to a lack of progress in the weaker children.

All 116 principals who returned the 2000/01 Planning Questionnaires provided details of their school's organisational priority. The most frequently cited organisational priority related to sporting events. The specific objectives reported in this area varied, and included, for example, organising events with other schools in the cluster, and teaching children about competing and being a part of a team. A focus on the Arts, with specific aims such as enabling the children to appreciate dance, mime, and singing, was the next most common organisational priority detailed by principals. While the strategies adopted to achieve these priorities varied depending on the particular objective, most strategies involved organising educational and extra-curricular events. Consulting participants' opinions was the main means by which the effectiveness of the strategies was evaluated. Children's opinions were the most common source of feedback. Principals' comments regarding the outcomes of these strategies were for the most part positive, with the majority noting that children had derived some benefit from the initiative. Co-operation among participants in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme, and in the wider community, was also enhanced as a result of the strategies. However, it appeared that in some schools, practical factors (including lack of funding, time constraints, and transport difficulties) limited the positive impact of the strategies.

Of the 116 respondents who detailed a home-school priority in 2000/01, over half reported the provision of educational or extra-curricular courses for parents to be their main priority. Increasing parental involvement in school activities, enabling parents to meet socially, and promoting parental support of their children's education were also common home-school priorities. Organising educational and extra-curricular courses for parents was the most favoured strategy adopted to address home-school priorities. A variety of other specific strategies such as enlisting outside expertise and holding open days for parents and children were also reported. The most common methods for evaluating whether the objectives had been achieved involved consulting parents and gathering feedback about the courses. Data on attendance at courses and the number of participants who achieved course objectives were also used to evaluate the success or failure of strategies. When asked to report on the outcomes of strategies, a majority of principals reported some type of positive reaction from parents, indicating for example that they had enjoyed the course or had learned from the experience. However, a quarter of principals also felt that there was a lack of commitment from parents, and a minority reported difficulties in getting 'target' families involved in activities. A minority also reported that practical problems had hindered the effectiveness of strategies.

While differences in coding procedures and changes to the wording of the questionnaire made it difficult to compare the 1997/98 and 2000/01 results, some tentative conclusions can be drawn from a general review of principals' responses in both years.

First, the results seem to suggest that, for the most part, School Plans were not fixed and rigid. It would appear that the elements of the School Plan which required on-going focus on the curriculum and home-school priorities were retained throughout the five years. That English remained the most popular curriculum priority is not surprising given the fact that reading, writing and communication are fundamental life skills. Furthermore, it appears that schools' home-school priorities continued to emphasise the role of parents in their children's education. In fact, for each of the areas of curriculum, organisational, and home-school priorities in 1997/98 and 2000/01, parental involvement was often described as both a priority *and* a strategy. While this may be due to principals' interpretations of the items, it is also indicative of the value that schools place on parental involvement. Furthermore, as the development of home-school links is a key aim of the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme in rural areas, it suggests that the scheme has been effective in this regard. In contrast, it would seem that schools' organisational objectives were adapted as the scheme evolved, and strategies and evaluations were modified accordingly. While in 1997/98, the emphasis was on administrative issues, such as increasing communication and management within schools, in 2000/01 schools were more focused on pupil-centred objectives, such as increasing children's appreciation of sports and Arts. It may be the case that administrative problems which were present at the outset of the scheme were resolved as the scheme progressed, thus allowing schools to identify new organisational objectives.

It would also seem that schools continued to employ particular *strategies* throughout the five years. For example, in both 1997/98 and 2000/01, the most common strategy used to address curriculum priorities involved the purchase of new materials. This suggests that the additional funding under the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme was of benefit in helping schools to meet some of the curriculum objectives laid out in their five-year plan. Furthermore, it would appear that strategies relating to parental involvement were particularly effective, as such strategies were consistently reported across all priority areas by principals in both years. Overall, that the list of strategies varied considerably for both 1997/98 and 2000/01 suggests that in both years, schools were flexible and prepared to employ a range of approaches to meet their specified priorities.

Opinions were the most popular source of evaluative information for the home-school and organisational priorities in both years. This is not surprising given that most of the strategies associated with these priorities involved establishing courses and organising activities. However, teachers' opinions were most often sought for organisational priorities in 1997/98, while in 2000/01 children's opinions were the most common source of feedback. These results are consistent with the finding that most of the organisational strategies in 1997/98 focused on teachers and school staff, while in 2000/01, the majority of organisational strategies involved organising events for children.

Informal and formal tests were the most commonly used methods of evaluating strategies associated with curriculum priorities in 2000/01. This represents a shift from 1997/98, where staff discussion and parental opinions were the most commonly employed methods of evaluation. The fact that a majority of schools employed standardised tests in 2000/01 suggests that schools benefited from the in-service training, which stressed the importance of using formal testing methods to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies. Furthermore, many schools employed a combination of evaluation techniques to assess the effectiveness of a given strategy. These findings are positive, and seem to indicate that schools appreciated the importance of gathering accurate and comprehensive information in order to evaluate their progress.

Indeed, an examination of the *outcomes* reported by principals in 2000/01 suggests that the majority of participants in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme had derived some benefit from the initiatives outlined in the School Plans. At the same time, practical factors, including a lack of space, time constraints, and transportation difficulties seemed to operate to limit the effectiveness of strategies. A minority of principals also expressed concerns that the strategies were not reaching 'target' pupils and families. It is likely that addressing these practical concerns and modifying strategies so that they involve all pupils and families would serve to further enhance the positive impact of the interventions outlined in the School Plan.

3. THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF PUPILS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Poor scholastic achievement is often cited as one of the main correlates of educational disadvantage. In fact, school performance (as reflected in participation and achievement) may be regarded as the most significant indicator of educational disadvantage as far as the educational system is concerned (Kellaghan et al., 1995).

In recent years, several studies have been conducted in Ireland in which the achievements of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were assessed. In a report on remedial education, Shiel and Morgan (1998) cited data from the standardisation of Levels 1 and 2 of the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test in 1995, which indicated that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of pupils in designated and non-designated schools at both class levels. The authors also reported Drumcondra Primary Mathematics Test (DPMT) standardisation figures for pupils in schools that were designated as disadvantaged. Results showed that pupils in designated schools at each class level (1st to 6th inclusive) consistently achieved scores that were over half of one standard deviation lower than their counterparts in non-designated schools.

More recently, Hayes and Kernan (2001) described national data collected as part of the IEA pre-primary project. According to the authors, the results of achievement testing of seven-year old pupils showed "a statistically significant difference in performance on all measures in favour of children attending non-designated schools when compared to those attending designated schools." These and other studies suggest that the mean achievements of pupils attending schools designated as disadvantaged consistently compare unfavourably with those of pupils in other schools.

In a preliminary report on the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme in rural schools, the English reading and Mathematics achievements of 3rd and 6th class pupils in the selected schools in 1997 were described (Eivers & Weir, 1998). The data indicated that pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools were scoring at about the same level as the norm group in reading and Mathematics. Weir & Ryan (2000) found that pupil participation (as measured by the percentage of pupils that completed the Junior Certificate Examination) was slightly lower among students who received their primary education in participating rural schools than among students nationally (the early leaving rates were 6% and 5% respectively). Data on the achievements of the 94% of students from *Breaking the Cycle* schools who remained in school until the Junior Certificate showed that their achievements in the Junior Certificate Examination were similar to those of students nationally. Therefore, data on rural pupils' completion rates and reading and Mathematics achievements point to levels of scholastic achievement and attainment that are about the same as those of students nationally.

In this section, the achievements of pupils in 3rd and 6th classes in 1997 will be compared with the achievements of their counterparts in 2000.

3.1. THE READING ACHIEVEMENT TEST

The Drumcondra Primary Reading Test (DPRT) (Educational Research Centre, 1993) was used to assess pupils' English reading achievements. The DPRT is a group-administered test designed for use in primary schools. Levels 3, 4, 5, and 6 are for use in 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th classes respectively. At each level of the DPRT, there are two forms; Form A and Form B. Form A of the test was used to assess reading in *Breaking the Cycle* schools. The test assesses two aspects of reading: Reading Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension. The Reading Vocabulary subtest consists of 40 questions, each containing a target word embedded in a short sentence, and four distractors. The pupil must determine which of the four distractors is closest in meaning to the target word. The Reading Comprehension subtest consists of three passages, each followed by 12 questions. For each question, the pupil must determine which of four possible answers is the correct one.

The content of the Reading Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension subtests is based on an analysis of the English curriculum, and of textbooks in English and other subjects that were in use at the time of the test's development. The total test takes about 90 minutes to administer, including time for distributing test materials, explaining what to do, and collecting materials. In *Breaking the Cycle* schools, the two parts of the DPRT were administered in separate testing sessions so as not to tire pupils.

3.2. THE SAMPLES OF PUPILS

Fifty of the 123 rural schools in *Breaking the Cycle* participated in the achievement-testing phase of the evaluation in 1997. Two schools from each cluster were selected to participate. The purpose of selecting two schools from each cluster was twofold. First, this method of sampling resulted in representation for every cluster of schools. Second, it resulted in fairly equal workloads for the local scheme co-ordinators who were engaged to do the achievement testing. For sampling purposes, one-teacher schools were eliminated from the pool as it was thought impracticable to organise achievement testing in them. Two schools were then randomly chosen from each of the 25 clusters with one constraint: Only schools which had an overall 'index' of disadvantage[1] of 8 or greater were to be included. Therefore, if a school with a score of less than 8 was selected, it was replaced by another randomly selected higher scoring school from the same cluster. The final sample consisted of 42 schools in which English was the spoken language, and 8 scoileanna Ghaeltachta. When it came to retesting in 2000, the intention was to use the same 50 schools that had participated in the testing in 1997. However, only 49 of the original 50 sampled schools were available to participate in 2000, because one school voluntarily withdrew from the scheme in 1999. In addition to this, the test results of two further schools could not be processed due to errors in the

[1]The method of calculating this score was based on information on socio-economic characteristics of families furnished by schools in their application to join the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme.

administration of the tests. This meant that complete test scores were available for only 47 of the original 50 schools in 2000.

All 3rd and 6th class pupils in the selected schools were eligible for assessment in English reading and Mathematics in 2000. [Some schools – in particular those with multi-grade classes – opted to have their 4th and 5th classes tested also, but the test results are not being used in the evaluation of the scheme]. In both 1997 and 2000, teachers were given the option of excluding pupils for whom reading the test booklets would present major difficulties. The numbers and percentages of pupils excluded at teachers' discretion in 1997 and 2000 are given in Table 3.1. As Table 3.1 shows, teachers excluded about the same percentage of pupils in 2000 as they did in 1997. It is noteworthy that, in both years, the overall rate of exclusion was quite low, but that a greater percentage of pupils were excluded at 3rd than at 6th class level on both occasions.

Table 3.1. Numbers and percentages of excluded pupils at 3rd and 6th class levels in 1997 and 2000.

Class level	**No. of excluded pupils in 1997**	**Total no. of pupils in 1997**	**% excluded in 1997**	**No. of excluded pupils in 2000**	**Total no. of pupils in 2000**	**% excluded in 2000**
3rd class	17	(*N*=409)	4.2%	15	(*N*=347)	4.3%
6th class	12	(*N*=490)	2.4%	11	(*N*=399)	2.8%
Totals	29	(*N*=899)	3.2%	26	(*N*=746)	3.5%

The numbers of pupils at 3rd and 6th class levels in 1997 and 2000 are given in Table 3.2. The total numbers of pupils at both levels were lower in 2000 than in 1997. At 3rd class in 2000, 94.6% of pupils had scores for Vocabulary, 92.5% had scores for Comprehension, and 91.9% had total reading scores. At 6th class, 92.8% of pupils had scores for Vocabulary, 94.1% had scores for Comprehension and 92% had total reading scores. The percentages of 3rd and 6th class pupils taking each of the subtests was fairly similar in 1997 and 2000.

Table 3.2. Numbers and percentages of pupils tested in English reading, by class level and reading subtest, in 1997 and 2000.

	Number of pupils according to class level in 1997		Number of pupils according to class level in 2000	
Test / subtest	**3rd class (total *N*=392*)**	**6th class (total *N*=478*)**	**3rd class (total *N*=332*)**	**6th class (total *N*=388*)**
Reading: Vocabulary	*N* = 364 (92.9%)	*N* = 437 (91.4%)	*N* = 314 (94.6%)	*N* = 360 (92.8%)
Reading: Comprehension	*N* = 363 (92.6%)	*N* = 436 (91.2%)	*N* = 307 (92.5%)	*N* = 365 (94.1%)
***Reading*: Total**	*N* = 362 (92.3%)	*N* = 433 (90.6%)	*N* = 305 (91.9%)	*N* = 357 (92.0%)

*Total does not include excluded pupils.

Table 3.3 presents the previous information slightly differently, and shows the numbers and percentages of pupils who sat for one, both, or neither of the reading subtests in 2000. At 3rd class, 4.8% of pupils were absent from school on both testing occasions, while at 6th class, 5.2% of pupils missed both subtests due to absence from school. It should be noted that, although the rationale for administering the tests on two separate occasions was to avoid tiring pupils, this approach may have resulted in a lower percentage of pupils with complete reading achievement data.

Table 3.3. Numbers and percentages of 3rd and 6th class pupils in 2000 who sat for both subtests, for one subtest, or for neither of the subtests in reading.

Class level	**Both subtests**	**Only one subtest**	**Neither subtest**
3rd class (*N*=332)	**(91.9%)** (*N*=305)	**(3.3%)** (*N*=11)	**(4.8%)** (*N*=16)
6th class (*N*=388)	**(92.0%)** (*N*=357)	**(2.8%)** (*N*=11)	**(5.2%)** (*N*=20)

3.3. THE READING ACHIEVEMENT OF PUPILS

Achievement test results are first reported according to mean total reading scores (i.e., a combined score for both parts of the DPRT) for each class level, followed by mean scores for the subtests of Vocabulary and Comprehension. The scores presented for the subtests and for the overall test are mean raw scores. Raw scores represent the number of items correctly answered and are used to compare the performance of pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools with that of the norm group (the national sample of pupils on whom the test was standardised) at 3rd and 6th class levels. For purposes of comparison, reading scores for pupils in 1997 are also reported. The maximum possible total raw score on the DPRT is 76, which is achieved if all answers in the Vocabulary (40 items) and Comprehension (36 items) subtests are correct.

Figures 3.1 to 3.4 show the distribution of pupils' reading raw scores at both 3rd and 6th class levels in 1997 and 2000.

Figure 3.1. Distribution of reading raw scores among 3rd class *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 1997.

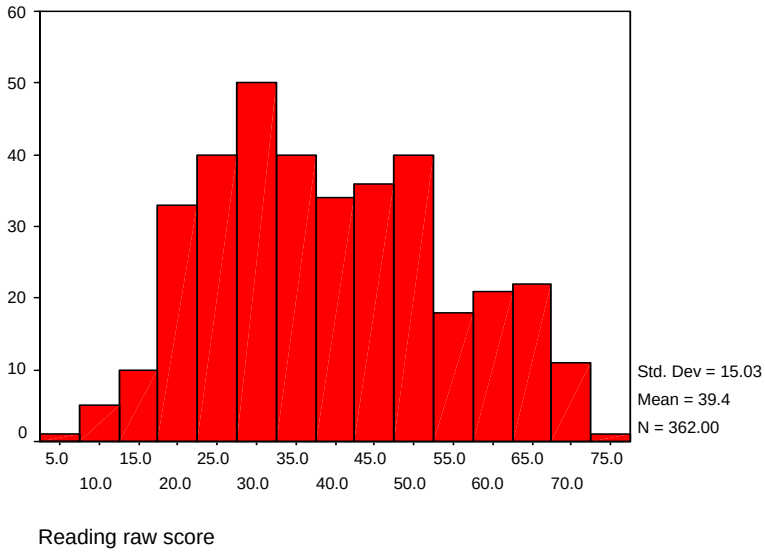


Figure 3.2. Distribution of reading raw scores among 3rd class *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 2000.

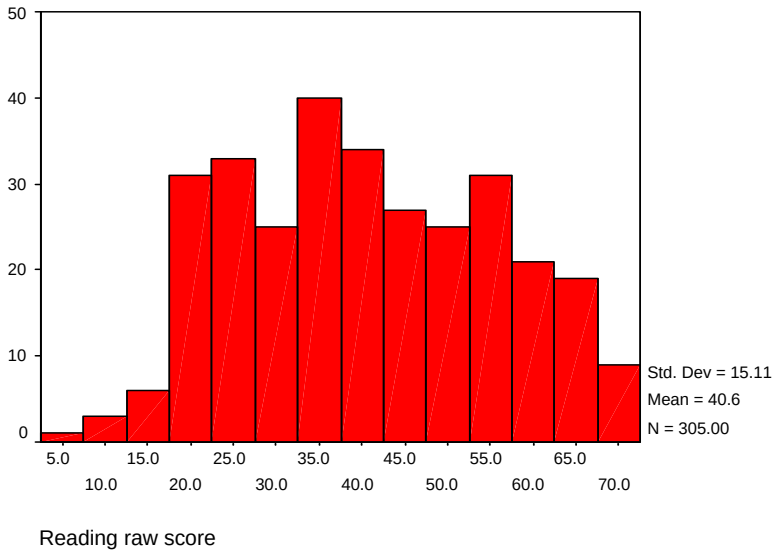


Figure 3.3. Distribution of reading raw scores among 6th class *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 1997.

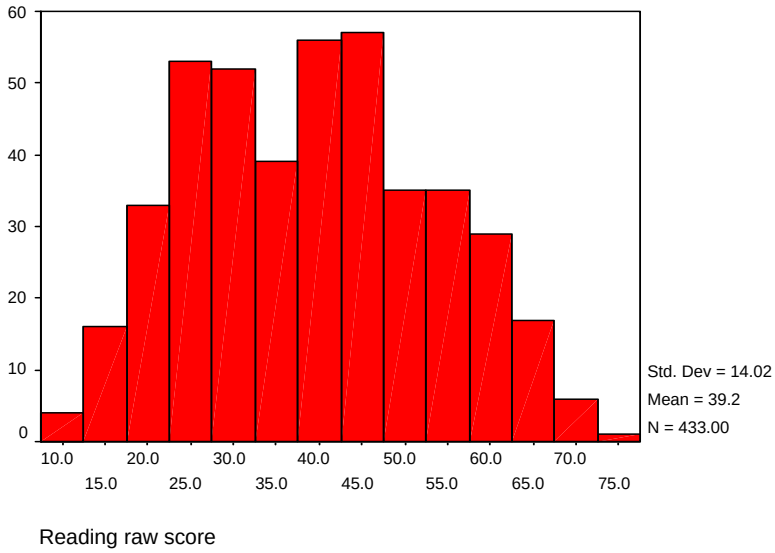
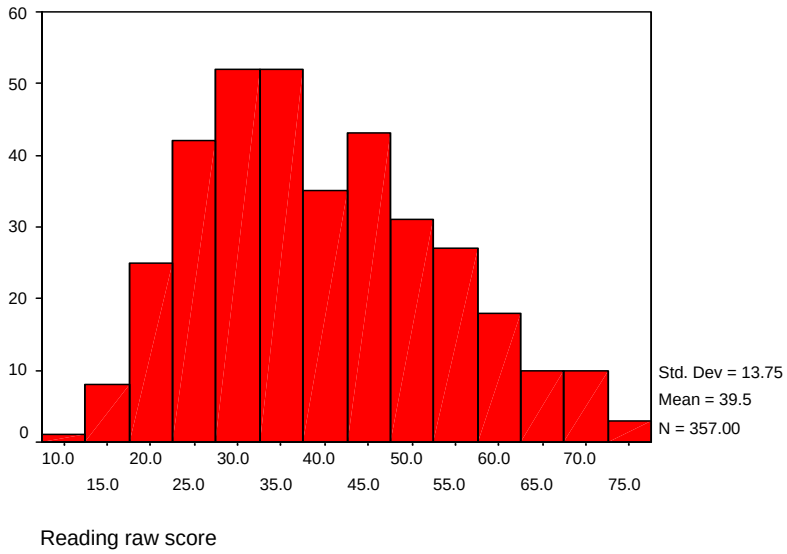


Figure 3.4. Distribution of reading raw scores among 6th class *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 2000.



Third class pupils in 2000 were found to have a mean total reading raw score of 40.6, compared to a mean of 38.5 for the group on which the test was standardised (Table 3.4). A mean raw score of 41 corresponds to a percentile rank of 58, indicating that rural pupils in 3rd class performed at the same level or better than 58% of pupils nationally. The reading performance of 3rd class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools was, therefore, slightly, but not significantly, better than that of pupils at this level nationally. Furthermore, the average score achieved by pupils in 3rd class in 2000 was higher (although not significantly so) than that achieved by 3rd class in 1997 (40.62 and 39.45 respectively).

At 6th class level, the mean raw score of rural pupils on the reading test as a whole was 39.5 which compares with a mean of 40.4 for the norm group (Table 3.4). The corresponding percentile rank for pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools is 51, indicating that 6th class pupils performed as well or better than 51% of pupils at this level nationally. Thus, the overall reading achievement of 6th class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools is similar to that of 6th class pupils nationally. As was the case at 3rd class level, the mean score achieved by pupils in 6th class in 2000 was higher (but only slightly, and not significantly so) than that of the 6th class cohort in 1997 (39.53 and 39.21 respectively).

Table 3.4. Means and standard deviations (raw scores) of pupils in 3rd and 6th classes in *Breaking the Cycle* rural schools in 1997 and 2000, and in a national sample on the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test (Levels 3 and 6).

	Mean and *SD*: Pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* rural schools (1997)	Mean and *SD*: Pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* rural schools (2000)	Mean and *SD:* National Sample
3rd class reading	*M* = 39.45, *SD* = 15.03 (*N* = 362)	*M* = 40.62, *SD* = 15.11 (*N* = 305)	*M* = 38.51, *SD* = 15.22
6th class reading	*M* = 39.21, *SD* = 14.02 (*N* = 433)	*M* = 39.53, *SD* = 13.75 (*N* = 357)	*M* = 40.38, *SD* = 14.95

As well as looking at average scores for the groups, it is also useful to examine achievement levels in terms of the number of high-scoring and low-scoring pupils. One way of doing this is to examine the percentage of pupils whose scores were one or more standard deviations[2] below and above the national mean. At 3rd class level in 2000, the reading scores of 15.4% of pupils lie one standard deviation or more below the national mean (Table 3.5), compared to 18.0% of pupils in the national sample. A greater percentage (22.6%) of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils have scores which were one standard deviation or more above the mean, compared to 18.0% nationally (Table 3.6). In 2000, about the same percentage of 3rd class pupils had scores that were one standard deviation below the mean than was the case in 1997 (15.4% and 15.5% respectively). On the other hand, a greater percentage of 3rd class pupils in 2000 had scores that were one standard deviation above the mean than was the case in 1997 (22.6% and 18.8% of pupils respectively).

At 6th class level in 2000, similar percentages of pupils had scores that were one standard deviation or more below and above the national mean (15.4% and 14.6% respectively). This compares slightly unfavourably with the percentages in the national sample, particularly at the upper end of the distribution, where the scores of 21.0% of pupils lie one or more standard deviations above the mean.

Table 3.5. Percentage of 3rd and 6th class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* rural schools in 1997 and 2000, and in a national sample, scoring one standard deviation[1] or more below the national mean on the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test.

Class level	Percentage of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils scoring one *SD* or more below national mean in 1997	Percentage of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils scoring one *SD* or more below national mean in 2000	Percentage of national sample scoring one *SD* or more below the mean	National Mean and *SD*
3rd class	15.5%	15.4%	18.0%	*M* = 38.51 *SD*= 15.20
6th class	18.0%	15.4%	18.0%	*M* = 40.38 *SD*= 14.95

[1]Raw score at 3rd class : 23
Raw score at 6th class : 25

[2] The standard deviation (*SD*) may be thought of as the average amount by which scores vary from the mean. In addition, standard deviation units are commonly used to describe an individual's score relative to others in a group. In the case of the DPRT, a 3rd class pupil with a score which is one *SD* below the mean (raw score=23) would be placed at the 18th percentile (i.e., his/her score would be equal to or better than 18% of the norm group), while a pupil scoring one *SD* above the mean (raw score=54) would be at the 82nd percentile (i.e., his/her score would be equal to or better than 82% of the norm group).

Table 3.6. Percentage of 3rd and 6th class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* rural schools in 1997 and 2000, and in a national sample, scoring one standard deviation[1] or more above the national mean on the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test.

Class level	Percentage of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils scoring one *SD* or more above national mean in 1997	Percentage of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils scoring one *SD* or more above national mean in 2000	Percentage of national sample scoring one *SD* or more above the mean	National Mean and *SD*
3rd class	18.8%	22.6%	18.0%	*M* = 38.51 *SD*= 15.20
6th class	15.7%	14.6%	21.0%	*M* = 40.38 *SD*= 14.95

[1]Raw score at 3rd class : 54
Raw score at 6th class : 55

An alternative way of examining reading achievement is to look at the percentage of pupils with extreme scores (i.e., below the 10th percentile and above the 90th percentile). Since the Special Education Review Body (Department of Education, 1993) proposed that scores below the 10th percentile signal the need for remediation, this cut-off point may be regarded as appropriate for defining low reading achievement in the current context. At 3rd class level in 2000, the total reading score of 5.9% of pupils fell below the 10th percentile, while a greater percentage of scores (9.8%) were above the 90th percentile. At 6th class level fairly equal percentages of pupils achieved scores that were below the 10th percentile and above the 90th percentile (Table 3.7).

Table 3.7. Percentage of *Breaking the Cycle* rural pupils in 1997 and 2000 scoring below the 10th percentile[1] and above the 90th percentile[2] on the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test according to grade level.

	Percentile	
Class level	**<10th**	**>90th**
3rd class 1997	5.5%	9.4%
3rd class 2000	5.9%	9.8%
6th class 1997	9.2%	3.7%
6th class 2000	7.0%	7.3%

[1] Raw score at 3rd class : 19 ; Raw score at 6th class : 21
[2] Raw score at 3rd class : 61 ; Raw score at 6th class : 62

3.4. PUPILS' ACHIEVEMENTS IN READING VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION

As described earlier, the DPRT is composed of a Vocabulary subtest containing 40 items and a Comprehension subtest containing 36 items. In 2000, *Breaking the Cycle* 3rd class pupils, on average, were able to answer correctly 52% of Vocabulary items and 55% of Comprehension items (Table 3.8). This compares with a rate of 50-51% of items correct in each section for the norm group. Comparisons with 3rd class pupils' performance in both content areas in 1997 reveal that 3rd class pupils performed slightly better in both Vocabulary and Comprehension in 2000 than did their counterparts in 1997.

Table 3.8. Mean raw scores, and mean percentage of items correct, achieved by *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 1997 and 2000, and by a national sample, by reading content area and class level.

	Reading content area		
Group / level	**Vocabulary** (Number of items = 40)	**Comprehension** (Number of items = 36)	**Total test** (Number of items = 76)
3rd class 1997 (*BTC*)	***M*=20.27 (*N*=364) (51%)**	***M*=19.21 (*N*=363) (53%)**	***M*=39.45 (*N*=362) (52%)**
3rd class 2000 (*BTC*)	***M*=20.72 (*N*=314) (52%)**	***M*=19.81 (*N*=307) (55%)**	***M*=40.62 (*N*=305) (53%)**
3rd class (national)	*M*=20.1 (*SD*=8.4) (50%)	*M*=18.4 (*SD*=7.7) (51%)	*M*=38.5 (*SD*=15.2) (51%)
6th class 1997 (*BTC*)	***M*=19.78 (*N*=437) (49%)**	***M*=19.39 (*N*=436) (54%)**	***M*=39.21 (*N*=433) (52%)**
6th class 2000 (*BTC*)	***M*=19.85 (*N*=360) (49%)**	***M*=19.54 (*N*=365) (54%)**	***M*=39.53 (*N*=357) (52%)**
6th class (national)	*M*=20.8 (*SD*=8.6) (52%)	*M*=19.6 (*SD*=7.2) (54%)	*M*=40.4 (*SD*=14.9) (53%)

At 6th class level in 2000, *Breaking the Cycle* pupils answered correctly 49% of Vocabulary items and 54% of items in the Comprehension section (Table 3.8). In both reading content areas, 6th class pupils in 2000 achieved the same percentage of items correct as did 6th class pupils in 1997. It is interesting to note that *Breaking the Cycle* pupils' performance was slightly stronger in Comprehension than in Vocabulary at both class levels and in both years.

3.5. THE ACHIEVEMENTS IN VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION OF PUPILS WHO SAT ONLY ONE SUBTEST

It is worth examining the achievements in reading Vocabulary and Comprehension of pupils who do not have total reading scores in 2000 (i.e., those pupils who were absent from school on the day on which one of the two reading subtests was administered). Logic would suggest that pupils who were absent for one of the tests might be characterised by poorer achievement levels than the better attenders (i.e.,

those who were in present on both testing occasions). To investigate this, the mean scores of 3rd and 6th class pupils who sat only one subtest were computed separately (Table 3.9).

Table 3.9. Mean raw scores of 3rd class pupils and 6th class pupils on reading Vocabulary and Comprehension subtests according to whether they sat both reading subtests or were absent for one subtest.

	Number of pupils	Vocabulary mean	Comprehension mean
3rd class pupils *present* for both subtests	*N*=305	20.78	19.83
3rd class pupils *absent* for one subtest	*N*=11	18.44	16.50
3rd class pupils *absent* for both subtests	*N*=16	-	-
6th class pupils *present* for both subtests	*N*=357	19.85	19.67
6th class pupils *absent* for one subtest	*N*=11	19.00	13.50
6th class pupils *absent* for both subtests	*N*=20	-	-

It should be noted that, due to high levels of pupil attendance during testing, the numbers of pupils with only one subtest score are very small. However, as Table 3.9 shows, there is evidence that both 3rd and 6th class pupils who were present for both reading subtests performed better than those who were present for only one. However, this difference statistically significant only in the area of reading Comprehension at 6th class level, where pupils who were present for both subtests had six more items correct than pupils who were present for only one subtest (t= 2.9; df=366; p<.01).

3.6. COMPARISONS OF PUPILS' READING ACHIEVEMENTS USING DATA FROM 1997 AND 2000

Descriptions of pupils' achievements in reading have so far relied on comparisons of the mean scores of groups of pupils tested in 1997 and 2000 (i.e., independent groups). For example, the mean reading score achieved by all 3rd class pupils tested in 1997 was compared with the mean score of the 3rd class cohort in 2000. Within each cohort, the performance of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils has also been described with reference to that of the norm group on the relevant level of the test. However, other comparisons are possible given the availability of achievement data for two grade levels on two occasions. Figure 3.5 shows a graphical representation of the possible comparisons.

The majority of 3rd class pupils in 1997 were in 6th class in 2000, and so their relative achievement gains or losses over the three years of the scheme can be examined. However, due to pupils enrolling in and transferring out of participating schools between 1997 and 2000 (and pupil absences during the testing sessions), only 284 pupils of a total of 365 have complete reading scores for both occasions. Further, it is not possible to compare mean *raw scores* on the tests, as different levels of the test were taken by 3rd and 6th class pupils. A way of overcoming this difficulty is to use

standard scores[3] to describe achievement, which take into account pupil performance relevant to the group on which the test was standardised (Table 3.10).

Figure 3.5. A graphical representation of possible ways of comparing pupil achievements in 1997 and 2000, with arrows indicating the nature of the comparisons, and with shading and a broken line used to indicate the group that was tested on two occasions.

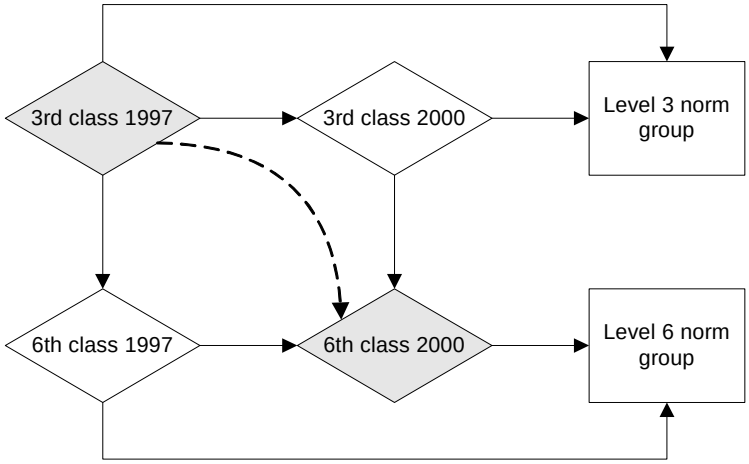


Table 3.10. Comparison of the English reading achievement (mean standard score) of 3rd class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1997 (Level 3) with their achievement in 6th class in 2000 (Level 6).

	Reading achievement (mean standard score on DPRT) (*N*=284)	Associated percentile rank
3rd class 1997	102.40	56
6th class 2000	100.26	51
Results of paired *t*-tests	*t*=4.2; *df*=283; *p*<.001	

As can be seen from Table 3.10, the core group of pupils for whom complete reading achievement data exist in 1997 and 2000 did less well relative to national norms in 2000 than in 1997. In 1997, the mean score of the group corresponded to a percentile rank of 56, indicating that their reading levels were as good as or better than 56% of the standardisation sample. By 2000, their mean score had fallen to a level where it corresponded to a percentile rank of 51, meaning that they were performing as well as or better than 51% of pupils nationally.

It is also worth using the available data to examine whether there have been any changes in the *discrepancy* between the achievements of 3rd class and 6th class pupils since the first occasion of testing. To do this, one needs to look at the relative achievement gaps that existed between 3rd and 6th

[3] Standard scores express test results on a single common scale. For example, in deriving standard score scales for the DPRT, the cumulative frequency distributions of raw scores for Total reading were normalised and transformed so that the resulting standard score distributions were normally distributed, with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15 (Educational Research Centre, 1993). Approximately 34% of standard scores are found between the mean and one standard deviation above the mean (standard scores between 100 and 115) while 34% of standard scores are found between the mean and one standard deviation below the mean standard scores between 85 and 100). A further 14% of scores are found between standard scores of 70 and 85, and between standard scores of 115 and 130. Finally, about 2% of scores are below a standard score of 70 and above a standard score of 130.

class pupils in 1997, and the equivalent gaps in 2000. Table 3.11 shows the difference in the percentile ranks associated with mean raw scores achieved by 3rd and 6th class pupils in 1997 and 2000. From Table 3.11 it can be seen that the performance of 3rd class pupils in reading was strong relative to that of pupils in 6th class both in 1997 and 2000. Furthermore, the difference has grown slightly since 1997. However, achievement gains at 3rd class level in 2000 (rather than losses at 6th class level), largely account for this. Mean achievement at 6th class level increased by 1 percentile point between 1997 and 2000, whereas mean achievement at 3rd class level increased by 3 percentile points.

Table 3.11. Percentile ranks associated with mean reading raw scores of 3rd and 6th class pupils in 1997 and 2000, and differences in percentile ranks of 3rd and 6th class pupils in both years.

	Percentile rank		
	BTC pupils 1997	*BTC* pupils 2000	Norm group[1]
3rd class	55	58	53
6th class	50	51	53
Difference in percentile rank	- 5	- 7	none

[1]The percentile rank that corresponds to the mean score of the norm group is 53 rather than 50, due to a slight skewing of the norm group achievement data.

3.7. PUPIL GENDER AND READING ACHIEVEMENT

The performance of boys and girls in reading in 2000 was compared (using independent *t*-tests) to examine whether the achievements of boys and girls differed. There was a slight difference in gender composition depending on grade level, with proportionately more boys than girls at 3rd class level, and more girls than boys at 6th class level (Table 3.12).

Table 3.12. Numbers and percentages of 3rd and 6th class boys and girls in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 2000 for whom achievement data exist.

	2000	
Pupil Gender	3rd Class	6th Class
Boys	182 (54.8%)	185 (47.7%)
Girls	150 (45.2%)	203 (52.3%)
Total	332 (100%)	388 (100%)

Table 3.13 describes 3rd and 6th class pupils' scores according to gender in each reading subtest, and in total reading, in both 1997 and 2000. Analysis of reading scores in 2000 according to pupil gender revealed only one small gender difference. Sixth class girls achieved significantly higher scores than boys in the area of reading Comprehension in 2000. Apart from this difference, no gender differences were found in 3rd and 6th class pupils' reading scores in 1997 or 2000.

Table 3.13. Mean Vocabulary and Comprehension raw scores and mean total reading raw scores of pupils in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools, by gender and class level in 1997 and 2000.

	1997			**2000**		
Reading Content Area	**3rd Class Girls**	**3rd Class Boys**	**Boys vs girls**	**3rd Class Girls**	**3rd Class Boys**	**Boys vs girls**
Vocabulary	20.7 (*N*=182)	19.8 (*N*=182)	*ns*	21.7 (*N*=145)	19.9 (*N*=169)	*ns*
Comprehension	19.9 (*N*=182)	18.6 (*N*=181)	*ns*	20.2 (*N*=145)	19.4 (*N*=162)	*ns*
Total Reading Score	40.5 (*N*=181)	38.3 (*N*=181)	*ns*	41.9 (*N*=144)	39.5 (*N*=161)	*ns*
	6th Class Girls	**6th Class Boys**	**Boys vs girls**	**6th Class Girls**	**6th Class Boys**	**Boys vs girls**
Vocabulary	19.7 (*N*=213)	19.9 (*N*=224)	*ns*	20.2 (*N*=193)	19.5 (*N*=167)	*ns*
Comprehension	19.5 (*N*=213)	19.3 (*N*=223)	*ns*	20.3 (*N*=195)	18.7 (*N*=170)	*p<.05*
Total Reading Score	39.2 (*N*=212)	39.2 (*N*=221)	*ns*	40.5 (*N*=193)	38.3 (*N*=164)	*ns*

The mean scores of 3rd and 6th class boys and girls on the reading test in 1997 were compared with 3rd and 6th class boys' and girls' mean scores in 2000, to ascertain if any changes had occurred in their reading ability over this period. As shown in Tables 3.14 and 3.15, mean scores in reading among both girls and boys at each class level remained stable between 1997 and 2000.

Table 3.14. Mean Vocabulary and Comprehension raw scores and mean total reading raw scores of girls in *Breaking the Cycle* schools, by class level in 1997 and 2000.

	3rd Class				**1997 vs 2000**	**6th Class**				**1997 vs 2000**
	Girls 1997		**Girls 2000**			**Girls 1997**		**Girls 2000**		
Reading Content Area	**Mean**	***SD***	**Mean**	***SD***	***p***	**Mean**	***SD***	**Mean**	***SD***	***p***
Vocabulary	20.7	8.2	21.7	8.2	*ns*	19.7	8.3	20.2	8.0	*ns*
Comprehension	19.9	7.6	20.2	7.3	*ns*	19.4	6.9	20.3	7.0	*ns*
Total Reading	40.5	15.0	41.9	14.8	*ns*	39.2	14.1	40.5	14.0	*ns*

Table 3.15. Mean Vocabulary and Comprehension raw scores and mean total reading raw scores of boys in *Breaking the Cycle* schools, by class level in 1997 and 2000.

	3rd Class				**1997 vs 2000**	**6th Class**				**1997 vs 2000**
	Boys 1997		**Boys 2000**			**Boys 1997**		**Boys 2000**		
Reading Content Area	**Mean**	***SD***	**Mean**	***SD***	***p***	**Mean**	***SD***	**Mean**	***SD***	***p***
Vocabulary	19.8	7.9	19.9	8.3	*ns*	19.9	7.9	19.5	7.7	*ns*
Comprehension	18.6	7.9	19.4	7.9	*ns*	19.3	6.9	18.7	6.9	*ns*
Total Reading	38.3	15.0	39.5	15.3	*ns*	39.2	13.9	38.3	13.4	*ns*

The performance of boys and girls on Level 3 of the reading test, which they attempted when they were in 3rd class in 1997, was compared (using paired *t*-tests) with their performance on Level 6, which they attempted when they were in 6th class in 2000. Standard scores were used in this analysis. Only pupils who had participated in testing in both years and who had test scores available for one or more of the subtests were included in the analyses. Tables 3.16 and 3.17 present girls' and boys' mean standard scores in reading in 1997 (Level 3) and 2000 (Level 6). Analyses revealed that the reading ability of boys and girls who had participated in the testing in both 1997 to 2000 declined slightly over the three years. Girls' mean standard scores on the reading test overall (Level 6) and on the Vocabulary subtest in 2000 were significantly lower than their standard scores on the corresponding tests in 1997 (Level 3). Likewise, boys' performance on the reading test as a whole (Level 6) and on both the Vocabulary and Comprehension subtests in 2000 was significantly poorer than their performance on the corresponding Level 3 tests in 1997.

Table 3.16. Achievements (mean standard scores) in reading of 3rd class girls in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1997 (Level 3) and again when they were in 6th class in 2000 (Level 6).

	3rd Class (Level 3) Girls1997		6th Class (Level 6) Girls 2000		1997 vs 2000
Reading Content Area	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	***p***
Vocabulary (*N*=149)	102.4	14.1	100.0	14.4	<.01
Comprehension (*N*=151)	103.9	14.4	102.5	14.3	*ns*
Total Reading Score (*N*=149)	103.4	14.3	101.4	14.0	<.01

Table 3.17. Achievements (mean standard scores) in reading of 3rd class boys in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1997 (Level 3) and again when they were in 6th class in 2000 (Level 6).

	3rd Class (Level 3) Boys 1997		6th Class (Level 6) Boys 2000		1997 vs 2000
Reading Content Area	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	***p***
Vocabulary (*N*=139)	100.7	13.4	98.6	12.6	<.01
Comprehension (*N*=140)	101.2	14.6	98.7	13.7	<.01
Total Reading Score (*N*=135)	101.3	13.6	99.0	11.9	<.001

3.8. A COMPARISON OF THE READING ACHIEVEMENTS OF PUPILS IN SCHOOLS IN WHICH THE CURRICULUM IS DELIVERED THROUGH ENGLISH AND IN SCOILEANNA GHAELTACHTA.

As the learning experiences of pupils in schools in which teaching is carried out through Irish may differ from those in which delivery of the curriculum is through English, the English reading achievement of pupils in each school type was compared. It should be noted, however, that the numbers of pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta are small, and, therefore, only very tentative conclusions may be drawn about the relationship between achievement and language of instruction.

Predictably, pupils who received their education through Irish performed slightly less well in the English reading test overall than did those in other schools (Table 3.18). While differences in the

area of reading Comprehension at 3rd class level slightly favour pupils from schools in which the teaching is carried out through English, the reverse, surprisingly, is true at 6th class level, although neither difference is statistically significant. In the area of reading Vocabulary, however, the performance of pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta is poorer at both 3rd and 6th class levels, but again, the differences are not statistically significant at either level. It is worth noting that the mean total reading score achieved by 3rd class pupils nationally is very similar to that of 3rd class pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta (38.5 and 38.3 respectively). At 6th class level, the disparity between the mean reading scores of pupils nationally and those in scoileanna Ghaeltachta is slightly greater (40.4 and 37.4 respectively).

Table 3.18. Vocabulary, Comprehension, and total reading raw scores of 3rd and 6th class pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta and in other rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 2000.

	Class level			
	3rd class		**6th class**	
Reading content area	**Scoileanna Ghaeltachta (*n*=56)**	**Other schools (*n*=258)**	**Scoileanna Ghaeltachta (*n*=47)**	**Other schools (*n*=318)**
Vocabulary	19.3	21.0	17.8	20.2
Comprehension	19.0	20.0	19.6	19.5
Total test	38.3	41.1	37.4	39.9

3.9. THE READING ACHIEVEMENTS OF PUPILS BY SCHOOL

In this section, the reading performance of pupils at school, rather than at aggregate level, is examined. School level performance is assessed by categorising schools according to whether the mean score of their 3rd and 6th class pupils was more than one half of a standard deviation, or more than one standard deviation, above or below the national reading mean, or within one half of a standard deviation of the national mean (Table 3.19). For present purposes, schools in which the mean score of pupils was within one half of a standard deviation of the national reading mean are considered to be performing at about the national average. Equivalent figures for 1997 are given for purposes of comparison.

Table 3.19. Numbers of schools in 1997 and 2000 in which pupils in 3rd and 6th classes had mean reading scores that were half of a standard deviation and one standard deviation above the national mean, half of a standard deviation and one standard deviation below the national mean, and within half of a standard deviation of the national mean

	Class level 1997 (*N*=50[1])		Class level 2000 (*N*=47[2]).	
	3rd class	6th class	3rd class	6th class
+ 1 *SD*	1	0	3	4
+ 1/2 *SD*	6	6	5	5
- 1 *SD*	2	2	1	-
- 1/2 *SD*	5	7	5	8
Within 1/2 *SD* of mean	35	35	31	30
Totals	49	50	45[3]	47

[1]Third class data are available only for 49 of the 50 sampled schools in 1997, as one 3rd class teacher declined to have her pupils tested.
[2]One rural school was not participating in *Breaking the Cycle* in 2000 and the results from two schools could not be processed.
[3]Two schools did not have pupils in 3rd class in 2000.

As Table 3.19 shows, in 2000, slightly more schools had 3rd class mean scores that were more than one half, and more than one standard deviation above the national reading mean (*n*=8) as had scores that were more than one half, and more than one standard deviation below the mean (*n*=6). Furthermore, the majority of schools had scores that were within one half of a standard deviation of the national mean (68.9% of 3rd classes tested). This suggests that reading performance in the majority of schools was not dissimilar to the national average. Indeed, in only one school was the mean score one standard deviation below the national mean. At 6th class level, performance was slightly better, with none of the 6th classes scoring one standard deviation below the mean, and four scoring one standard deviation above it. Further, the majority of 6th classes performed at about the national average (63.8% of schools scored within one half of a standard deviation of the national mean). A relatively small number of schools had 6th class average scores that could be considered weak (i.e., eight schools' average scores were more than half a standard deviation or more below the mean).

3.10. THE MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENT TEST

The Drumcondra Primary Mathematics Test (DPMT) (Educational Research Centre, 1997) is group-administered and is designed for use in primary schools. As is the case with the DPRT, Levels 3, 4, 5 and 6 are for use in standards 3, 4, 5, and 6 respectively. The content of all levels of the DPMT was based on the Mathematics curriculum and textbooks in Mathematics in use in Irish primary schools. Levels 3 - 6 of the DPMT assess three aspects of Mathematics: Computation, Concepts and Problem-solving. These three content areas are represented by three separate subtests. The Computation and Concepts subtests each consist of 35 questions, whereas the Problems subtest has 30 questions. For each question, the pupil must determine which of four possible answers is correct. The DPMT takes

approximately 2½ hours to administer. This includes time for distributing test materials, completing sample questions and doing the test itself. In administering the DPMT to pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools, testing was spread over two or three days to avoid tiring pupils.

3.11. THE SAMPLES OF PUPILS

The numbers of pupils at 3rd and 6th class levels who sat tests in Mathematics in 1997 and 2000 are given in Table 3.20. At 3rd class level in 2000, 93.7% of pupils had scores for Computation, 91% had scores for Concepts, 90.4% had scores for Problems, and 86.7% had total Mathematics scores. These percentages are roughly similar to those for 3rd class in 1997, indicating that absenteeism on the days of testing was about the same in both years. At 6th class level, 94.6% had scores for Computation, 95.4% for Concepts, 93.3% for Problems, and 89.4% had total Mathematics scores. The percentage of 6th class pupils taking each of the subtests was higher in 2000 than in 1997, indicating an improvement in attendance in 2000.

Table 3.20. Numbers and percentages of pupils tested in Mathematics, by class level and Mathematics subtest, in 1997 and 2000.

	Number of pupils according to class level in 1997		Number of pupils according to class level in 2000	
Test / subtest	**3rd class (total *N*=392*)**	**6th class (total *N*=478*)**	**3rd class (total *N*=332*)**	**6th class (total *N*=388*)**
Mathematics: Computation	*N* = 365 (93.1%)	*N* = 422 (88.3%)	*N* = 311 (93.7%)	*N* = 367 (94.6%)
Mathematics: Concepts	*N* = 356 (90.8%)	*N* = 417 (87.2%)	*N* = 302 (91.0%)	*N* = 370 (95.4%)
Mathematics: Problems	*N* = 352 (89.8%)	*N* = 425 (88.9%)	*N* = 300 (90.4%)	*N* = 362 (93.3%)
Mathematics: ***Total***	*N* = 345 (88.0%)	*N* = 404 (84.5%)	*N* = 288 (86.7%)	*N* =347 (89.4%)

*Total does not include excluded pupils.

Table 3.21 shows the numbers and percentages of pupils who sat for one to two subtests, for all three subtests, or for none of the subtests. At 3rd class level, 4.5% of pupils were absent from school on all three occasions when tests were administered, while at 6th class level, only 2.6% of pupils missed all three subtests due to absence from school. As was the case with reading achievement testing, spreading the testing sessions over several school days may have resulted in a lower percentage of pupils with complete Mathematics achievement data.

Table 3.21. Numbers and percentages of pupils in 2000 who sat for all three subtests, for one to two subtests, or for none of the subtests in Mathematics.

Class level	**All three subtests**	**One to two subtests**	**No subtests**
3rd class (*N*=332)	**(86.7%)** (*N*=288)	**(8.7%)** (*N*=29)	**(4.5%)** (*N*=15)
6th class (*N*=388)	**(89.4%)** (*N*=347)	**(8.0%)** (*N*=31)	**(2.6%)** (*N*=10)

3.12. THE MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENTS OF PUPILS

Levels of achievement in Mathematics are first reported according to mean total Mathematics score (i.e., an average raw score for all pupils in all three parts of the DPMT combined). This is followed by mean raw scores for the Computation, Concepts, and Problems subtests. Figures 3.6 to 3.9 show the distribution of pupils' Mathematics raw scores at both 3rd and 6th class levels in 1997 and 2000.

Figure 3.6. Distribution of Mathematics raw scores among 3rd class *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 1997.

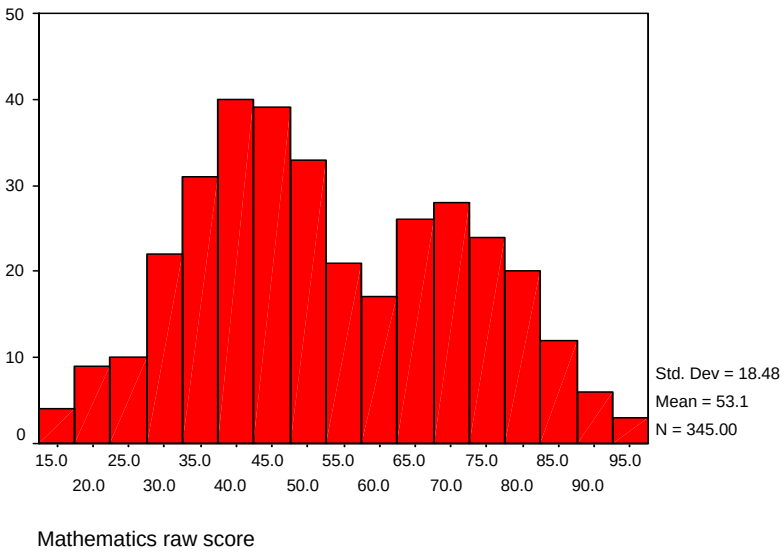


Figure 3.7. Distribution of Mathematics raw scores among 3rd class *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 2000.

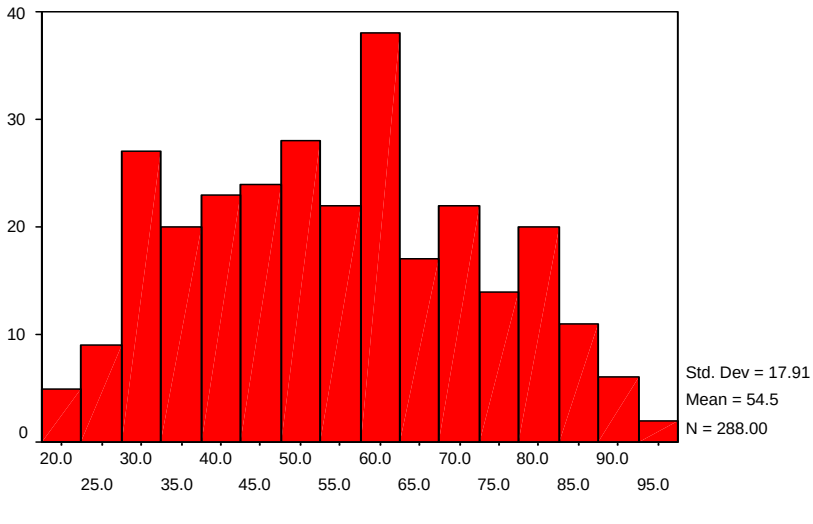


Figure 3.8. Distribution of Mathematics raw scores among 6th class *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 1997.

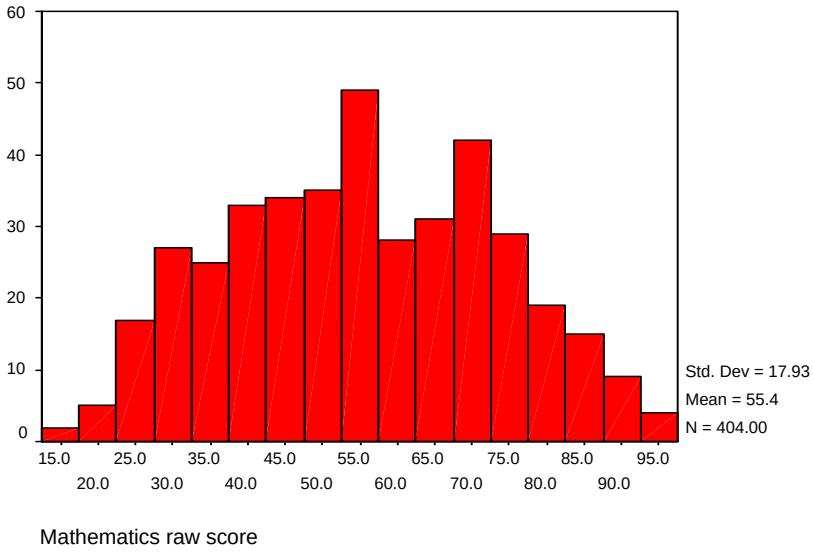
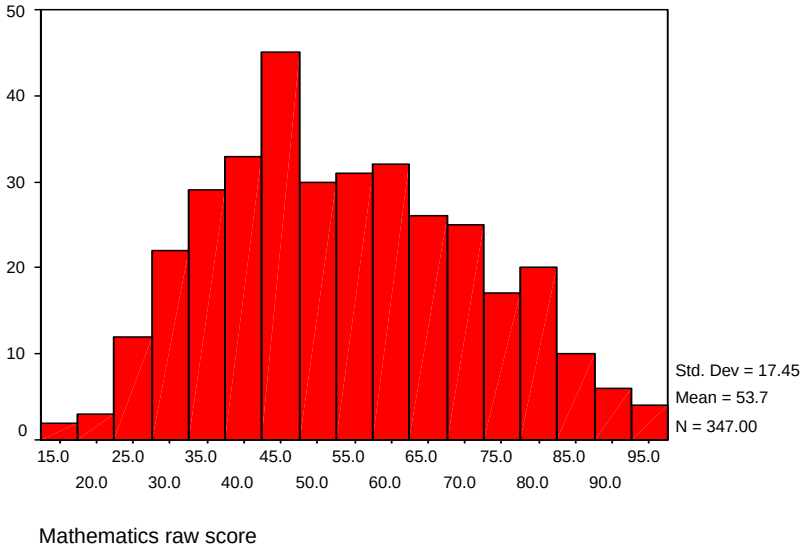


Figure 3.9. Distribution of Mathematics raw scores among 6th class *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 2000.



In 2000, 3rd class pupils achieved a mean total Mathematics score of 54.54 (Table 3.22). This means that across all three subtests, pupils, on average, answered correctly almost 55% of a possible total of 100 items. Compared with the norm group, the mean score of which is 58.43, *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 3rd class answered 4% fewer Mathematics items correctly than 3rd class pupils nationally. The mean score of 54.54 achieved by *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 3rd class corresponds to a percentile rank of 41, indicating that they performed at the same level or better than 41% of pupils in the norm group. Thus, the performance in Mathematics of 3rd class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools was slightly weaker than that of pupils nationally. Indeed, the mean raw score achieved by 3rd class pupils in 2000 is about a quarter of one standard deviation below the national mean. However, the Mathematics performance of 3rd class pupils in 2000 was marginally better (but not significantly so) than that of 3rd class pupils in 1997.

Table 3.22. Means and standard deviations (raw scores) of pupils in 3rd and 6th classes in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1997 and 2000, and in a national sample on the Drumcondra Primary Mathematics Test (Levels 3 and 6).

	Mean and *SD*: Pupils in *Breaking the Cycle rural schools (1997)*	Mean and *SD*: Pupils in *Breaking the Cycle rural schools (2000)*	Mean and *SD:* National Sample
3rd class Mathematics	*M* = 53.08, *SD* = 18.48 (*N* = 345)	*M* = 54.54, *SD* = 17.91 (*N* =288)	*M* = 58.43, *SD* = 18.03
6th class Mathematics	*M* = 55.37, *SD* = 17.93 (*N* = 404)	*M* =53.67, *SD* =17.45 (*N* =347)	*M* = 58.72, *SD* = 17.88

At 6th class level, the mean raw score of pupils in our sample on the Mathematics test as a whole was 53.67, which compares with a mean of 58.72 for the norm group. The corresponding percentile rank for pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools is 39, indicating that 6th class pupils performed as well or better than 39% of pupils nationally in 6th class. Overall, 6th class pupils achieved an average of 5% fewer Mathematics items correct than pupils at this level nationally. When described in terms of standard deviation units, the mean raw score achieved by 6th class pupils in 2000 is just over one-third of a standard deviation below the national mean. However, as was the case at 3rd class level, the performance in Mathematics of pupils in 6th class in 2000 was slightly better than it was in 1997.

An examination of the number of high-scoring and low-scoring pupils reveals that the Mathematics scores of more than one quarter (26%) of all 3rd class pupils in 2000 were one standard deviation or more below the national mean (Table 3.23). A much smaller percentage (15.6%) of 3rd class pupils in the same year had scores that are one standard deviation or more above the mean (Table 3.24). This contrasts with the pattern of scores in the national sample, where 18% of scores are one or more standard deviations below the mean and a similar percentage (19%) are above it. However, the pattern of scoring among *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 2000 differed from that in 1997. While fewer 3rd class pupils in 2000 had scores that were one standard deviation *below* the mean than was the case in 1997 (26% and 28.4% respectively), a greater percentage of pupils had scores that were one standard deviation *above* the mean in 2000 than was true in 1997 (15.6% and 13.3% respectively).

At 6th class level in 2000, 27.1% of pupils had scores that were one standard deviation or more below the national mean, compared with only 11.8% of pupils who had scores one standard deviation or more above the mean. While roughly equal numbers of 6th class pupils in the standardisation sample scored one standard deviation or more below and above the mean (19% and 18% respectively), the distribution of scores among pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools was far less symmetrical, and was characterised by an overrepresentation of low scores and an underrepresentation of high scores.

Table 3.23. Percentage of 3rd and 6th class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1997 and 2000, and in a national sample, scoring one standard deviation[1] or more below the national mean on the DPMT.

Class level	Percentage of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils scoring one *SD* or more below national mean in 1997	Percentage of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils scoring one *SD* or more below national mean in 2000	Percentage of national sample scoring one *SD* or more below the mean	National Mean and *SD*
3rd class	28.4%	26.0%	18%	*M* = 58.43 *SD*= 18.03
6th class	24.3%	27.1%	19%	*M* = 58.72 *SD*= 17.88

[1] Raw score at 3rd class : 40, Raw score at 6th class : 41

Table 3.24. Percentage of 3rd and 6th class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1997 and 2000, and in a national sample scoring one standard deviation[1] or more above the national mean on the DPMT.

Class level	Percentage of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils scoring one *SD* or more above national mean in 1997	Percentage of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils scoring one *SD* or more above national mean in 2000	Percentage of national sample scoring one *SD* or more above the mean	National Mean and *SD*
3rd class	13.3%	15.6%	19%	*M* = 58.43 *SD*= 18.03
6th class	11.6%	11.8%	18%	*M* = 58.72 *SD*= 17.88

[1] Raw score at 3rd class: 76, Raw score at 6th class: 77

An examination of the Mathematics achievement in 2000 of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils at the extreme ends of the distribution of scores (i.e., those with scores below the 10th percentile and above the 90th percentile), indicates that at 3rd class level, the total Mathematics score of 15.3% of pupils lies below the 10th percentile, while only 6.6% of scores are above the 90th percentile (Table 3.25). There are slightly fewer high- and low-scorers at 6th class level in 2000, where 4.6% of pupils achieved scores above the 90th percentile, and 11.8% had scores below the 10th percentile.

Table 3.25. Percentage of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils scoring below the 10th percentile[1] and above the 90th percentile[2] on the Drumcondra Primary Mathematics Test according to grade level, in 1997 and 2000.

	Percentile	
Class level	**<10th**	**>90th**
3rd class 1997	13.0%	4.1%
3rd class 2000	15.3%	6.6%
6th class 1997	12.6%	4.2%
6th class 2000	11.8%	4.6%

[1] Raw score at 3rd class : 33 ; Raw score at 6th class : 33
[2] Raw score at 3rd class : 84 ; Raw score at 6th class : 84

3.13. PUPILS' ACHIEVEMENTS IN MATHEMATICAL COMPUTATION, CONCEPTS AND PROBLEMS

As described earlier, the DPMT is composed of a Computation subtest containing 35 items, a Concepts subtest containing 35 items, and a Problems subtest containing 30 items. Third class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 2000 differed somewhat from the norm group in the percentage of items they correctly answered in each of the three subtests (Table 3.26). In the Computation subtest, an average of 56% of items were correctly answered by *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 3rd class (versus 62% by the norm group), 52% of Concepts items were correct (versus 54% in the norm group), and 54% of Problems items were correct (versus 60% in the norm group). There are, however, some differences in the percentage of items correct in each subtest achieved by 3rd class pupils in the 1997 cohort and their counterparts in 2000. While pupils in both years correctly answered 54% of items the Problems subtest, pupils in 2000 achieved 1% fewer items correct in Computation and 4% more items correct in Concepts than did pupils in the 1997 cohort.

At 6th class level in 2000, pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools achieved between 2% and 5% fewer items correct in the three Mathematics content areas than did pupils on whom the test was standardised. Also, in each content area, 6th class pupils in 2000 answered 2% fewer items correctly than did 6th class pupils in 1997. This signals that the observed disimprovement in Mathematics at 6th class level occurred equally across the three content areas, and is not attributable to a decline in a specific area.

Table 3.26. Mean raw scores, and mean percentage of items correct, achieved by *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in 1997 and 2000, and by a national sample, by Mathematics content area and class level.

	Mathematics content area			
Group / level	**Computation** (Number of items = 35)	**Concepts** (Number of items = 35)	**Problems** (Number of items = 30)	**Total test** (Number of items = 100)
3rd class 1997 (*BTC*)	***M*=20.0 (*N*=365) (57%)**	***M*=16.7 (*N*=356) (48%)**	***M*=16.1 (*N*=352) (54%)**	***M*=53.1 (*N*=345) (53%)**
3rd class 2000 (*BTC*)	***M*=19.7 (*N*=311) (56%)**	***M*=18.1 (*N*=302) (52%)**	***M*=16.3 (*N*=300) (54%)**	***M*=54.5 (*N*=288) (54%)**
3rd class (national)	*M*=21.7 (*SD*=7.3) (62%)	*M*=18.8 (*SD*=6.2) (54%)	*M*=18.0 (*SD*=6.5) (60%)	*M*=58.4 (*SD*=18.0) (58%)
6th class 1997 (*BTC*)	***M*=20.2 (*N*=422) (58%)**	***M*=18.2 (*N*=417) (52%)**	***M*=16.7 (*N*=425) (56%)**	***M*=55.4 (*N*=404) (55%)**
6th class 2000 (*BTC*)	***M*=19.6 (*N*=367) (56%)**	***M*=17.5 (*N*=370) (50%)**	***M*=16.2 (*N*=362) (54%)**	***M*=53.7 (*N*=347) (54%)**
6th class (national)	*M*=21.9 (*SD*=7.0) (58%)	*M*=19.0 (*SD*=6.4) (54%)	*M*=17.7 (*SD*=6.0) (59%)	*M*=58.7 (*SD*=17.9) (59%)

3.14. THE ACHIEVEMENTS IN COMPUTATION, CONCEPTS, AND PROBLEMS OF PUPILS WHO SAT ONLY ONE SUBTEST

As in the case of reading achievement, the mean Mathematics scores of pupils who sat only one or two of the three subtests were computed separately. This was done to investigate if pupils who were absent for one or two of the Mathematics subtests were characterised by poorer achievement levels than the better attenders (i.e., those who were present for all three subtests). Table 3.27 shows the mean Mathematics subtest scores of 3rd and 6th class pupils who sat only one or two subtests. The results support the hypothesis that the poorer attenders performed less well than did pupils who were present for all three subtests. At both 3rd and 6th class levels, the mean scores of pupils who had been absent on at least one occasion were lower in all three Mathematics content areas. At 3rd class level, pupils present for all subtests outperformed those absent for at least one in Computation (t= 2.4; df=315 p<.05), Concepts (t= 2.4; df=315; p<.05) and Problems (t= 2.0; df=315; p<.05). At 6th class level, significant differences were found in Computation (t= 2.0; df=376; p<.05), and Problems (t= 3.7; df=376; p<.05), but not in Concepts. These findings suggest that achievement levels in *Breaking the Cycle* schools may be *lower* than those expressed by scores which only describe pupils' performance on the Mathematics test as a whole. However, attendance levels during testing were relatively high, and so only a small number of pupils have incomplete data in Table 3.27.

Table 3.27. Mean raw scores of 3rd and 6th class pupils on Computation, Concepts, and Problems subtests according to whether they sat all three Mathematics subtests or were absent for one or two subtests.

	Number of pupils	Computation mean	Concepts mean	Problems mean
3rd class pupils *present* for all three subtests	*N*=288	19.9	18.3	16.4
3rd class pupils *absent* for one or two subtests	*N*=29	16.8	15.3	13.9
3rd class pupils *absent* for all three subtests	*N*=15	-	-	-
6th class pupils *present* for all three subtests	*N*=347	19.7	17.6	16.3
6th class pupils *absent* for one or two subtests	*N*=31	17.1	15.3	12.4
6th class pupils *absent* for all three subtests	*N*=10	-	-	-

3.15. COMPARISONS OF PUPILS' MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENTS USING DATA FROM 1997 and 2000

The Mathematics achievements of pupils have been described, up to now, in terms of comparisons of the mean scores of independent groups of pupils (e.g., the mean Mathematics score achieved by all 3rd class pupils tested in 1997 was compared with the mean score of the 3rd class cohort in 2000). Within each cohort, the performance of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils has also been described with reference to that of the norm group on the appropriate level of the test. However, other comparisons are possible

given the availability of achievement data for two grade levels on two occasions[4]. For example, the fact that the majority of 3rd class pupils in 1997 were in 6th class in 2000 permits their relative achievement gains or losses over the three-year period to be examined. It should be noted, however, that due to movement of pupils in and out of schools, as well as pupil absences during the administration of tests in both 1997 and 2000, total Mathematics scores on both occasions exist for only 267 pupils (of a total of 409 in 3rd class in 1997). Furthermore, because different levels of the test were taken by 3rd and 6th class pupils, it is not possible to compare mean *raw scores* on the tests, as the norms for each test level differ. To overcome this difficulty, standard scores are used to compare pupils' achievements on both occasions (Table 3.28).

Table 3.28. Comparison of the Mathematics achievement (mean standard score) of 3rd class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1997 (Level 3) with their achievement in 6th class in 2000 (Level 6).

	Mathematics achievement (mean standard score on DPMT) (*N*=267)	Associated percentile rank
3rd class 1997	96.0	39
6th class 2000	96.8	42
Results of paired *t*-tests	*t*= -1.4; *df*=266; *p*<.152 (*ns*)	

As can be seen from Table 3.28, analysis of the scores for the core group of pupils for whom complete Mathematics achievement data exist in 1997 and 2000 shows that their performance relative to the norm group was slightly, although not significantly, better in 2000 than in 1997. In 1997, the mean score of the group corresponded to a percentile rank of 39, indicating that their Mathematics levels were as good as or better than 39% of the standardisation sample. By 2000, their mean score had risen to a level where it corresponded to a percentile rank of 42, meaning that they were performing as well as or better than 42% of pupils nationally. It is also worth examining changes in the *discrepancy* between the Mathematics achievements of 3rd class and 6th class pupils since the first occasion of testing. To do this, one needs to look at the relative achievement gaps that existed between 3rd and 6th class pupils in 1997, and the equivalent gaps between them in 2000 (Table 3.29).

Table 3.29. Percentile ranks associated with mean Mathematics raw scores of 3rd and 6th class pupils in 1997 and 2000, and differences in percentile ranks of 3rd and 6th class pupils in both years.

	Percentile rank		
	BTC pupils 1997	*BTC* pupils 2000	Norm group
3rd class	39	41	47
6th class	43	39	47
Difference in percentile rank	+4	-2	none

While the performance of 6th class pupils in Mathematics was stronger relative to 3rd class in 1997, the situation was reversed in 2000. Mean achievement at 6th class level dropped by 4 percentile points between 1997 and 2000, whereas mean achievement at 3rd class level increased by 2 percentile

[4] The full range of possible comparisons was described graphically in Figure 3.5 in section 3.6.

points since 1997. Thus, the discrepancy between the achievements of 3rd and 6th class pupils was greater in 1997 than in 2000, pointing to greater similarities in the performance in Mathematics of Middle and Senior grade pupils in 2000.

3.16. PUPIL GENDER AND MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENT

Approximately 55% of 3rd class pupils who participated in achievement testing in 2000 were boys, while 45% were girls (see Table 3.12). Conversely, at 6th class level, there was greater percentage of girls (52.3%) than boys (47.7%). The mean scores of boys and girls in 1997 and 2000 were compared using independent *t*-tests (Table 3.30). No gender differences were found at 3rd class level for the test as a whole or for any individual subtest in 2000.

Table 3.30. Mean Computation, Concepts and Problems raw scores and mean total Mathematics raw scores of pupils in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools, by gender and class level in 1997 and 2000.

	1997			**2000**		
Mathematics Content Area	**3rd Class Girls**	**3rd Class Boys**	**Boys vs girls**	**3rd Class Girls**	**3rd Class Boys**	**Boys vs girls**
Computation	20.6 (*n*=186)	19.4 (*n*=179)	*ns*	19.6 (*n*=145)	19.8 (*n*=166)	*ns*
Concepts	16.6 (*n*=183)	16.7 (*n*=173)	*ns*	17.8 (*n*=142)	18.3 (*n*=160)	*ns*
Problems	16.2 (*n*=181)	16.0 (*n*=171)	*ns*	16.1 (*n*=139)	16.5 (*n*=161)	*ns*
Total Mathematics score	53.7 (*n*=178)	52.4 (*n*=167)	*ns*	53.6 (*n*=139)	55.4 (*n*=149)	*ns*
	6th Class Girls	**6th Class Boys**		**6th Class Girls**	**6th Class Boys**	
Computation	19.8 (*n*=207)	20.7 (*n*=215)	*ns*	20.2 (*n*=195)	18.8 (*n*=172)	<.05
Concepts	17.1 (*n*=205)	19.2 (*n*=212)	*ns*	17.0 (*n*=196)	18.0 (*n*=174)	*ns*
Problems	15.8 (*n*=207)	17.5 (*n*=218)	<.05	16.1 (*n*=191)	16.2 (*n*=171)	*ns*
Total Mathematics score	52.9 (*n*=199)	57.8 (*n*=205)	<.01	53.8 (*n*=183)	53.5 (*n*=164)	*ns*

As Table 3.30 shows, no gender differences were found for the Mathematics test at 3rd class level in either 1997 or 2000. In contrast, 6th class boys' and girls' mean scores on the test varied considerably from 1997 to 2000. In particular, 6th class girls achieved significantly higher scores than boys on the Computation subtest in 2000, whereas in 1997 there were no differences in the performances of boys and girls on this subtest. Conversely, boys outperformed girls on the Problems subtest and on the Mathematics test overall in 1997, whereas boys' scores on this subtest and on the test as a whole did not differ significantly from those of girls in 2000.

The mean scores of 3rd and 6th class boys and girls in Mathematics in 1997 and 2000 were compared to ascertain whether any changes had occurred over this period. As shown in Table 3.31, it

appears that the Mathematics achievement of both 3rd and 6th class girls remained stable between 1997 and 2000, as the subtest and overall scores of girls in each year did not differ significantly.

Table 3.31. Mean Computation, Concepts and Problems raw scores and mean total Mathematics raw scores of girls in *Breaking the Cycle* schools, by gender and class level in 1997 and 2000.

	3rd Class					**6th Class**				
	Girls 1997		**Girls 2000**		**1997 vs 2000**	**Girls 1997**		**Girls 2000**		**1997 vs 2000**
Mathematics Content Area	***Mean***	***SD***	***Mean***	***SD***		***Mean***	***SD***	***Mean***	***SD***	
Computation	20.6	6.8	19.6	6.6	*ns*	19.8	6.7	20.2	6.6	*ns*
Concepts	16.6	6.3	17.8	6.4	*ns*	17.1	5.8	17.0	5.9	*ns*
Problems	16.2	6.6	16.1	5.8	*ns*	15.8	5.5	16.1	5.6	*ns*
Total Mathematics score	53.7	17.9	53.6	16.9	*ns*	52.9	16.6	53.8	16.3	*ns*

Boys' scores on the three subtests (Computation, Concepts and Problems) and on the test overall varied considerably between 1997 and 2000. At 3rd class level, boys' Mathematical ability appears to have improved slightly with boys achieving significantly higher scores on the Concepts subtest in 2000 than in 1997. However, at 6th class level, boys' scores in all areas declined between 1997 to 2000, as their mean scores on the Computation, Concepts and Problems subtests, and on the Mathematics test overall were significantly lower in 2000 than in 1997 (Table 3.32).

Table 3.32. Mean Computation, Concepts and Problems raw scores and mean total Mathematics raw scores of boys in *Breaking the Cycle* schools, by gender and class level in 1997 and 2000.

	3rd Class					**6th Class**				
	Boys 1997		**Boys 2000**		**1997 vs 2000**	**Boys 1997**		**Boys 2000**		**1997 vs 2000**
Mathematics Content Area	***Mean***	***SD***	***Mean***	***SD***		***Mean***	***SD***	***Mean***	***SD***	
Computation	19.4	7.6	19.8	7.0	*ns*	20.7	7.1	18.8	7.1	$p<.05$
Concepts	16.7	6.6	18.3	6.5	$p<.05$	19.2	6.6	18.0	6.7	$p<.05$
Problems	16.0	6.6	16.5	6.7	*ns*	17.5	6.4	16.2	6.2	$p<.05$
Total Mathematics Score	52.4	19.1	55.4	18.8	*ns*	57.8	19.0	53.4	18.7	$p<.05$

The performance of boys and girls on Level 3 of the Mathematics test, which they attempted when they were in 3rd class in 1997, was compared with their performance on Level 6 of the Mathematics test, which they attempted when they were in 6th class in 2000. Standard scores were used in this set of analyses. Only pupils who had been tested in both years and who had test scores available for one or more of the subtests were included in the analysis. The mean standard scores of girls on Level 6 of the Mathematics test overall, and on two of the three Mathematics subtests (the exception being scores for Problems in which there was an improvement), did not differ significantly

from their standard scores on Level 3 of the test in 1997 (Table 3.33). The same pattern of scoring was found among boys (Table 3.34), where they performed significantly better in the area of Problems on Level 6 of the test than they had in 1997 on Level 3 of the test.

Table 3.33. Achievements (mean standard scores) in Mathematics of 3rd class girls in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1997 (Level 3) and again when they were in 6th class in 2000 (Level 6).

	3rd Class (Level 3) Girls1997		6th Class (Level 6) Girls 2000		
Mathematics Content Area	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*p*
Computation (*n*=155)	98.3	13.3	97.2	12.8	*ns*
Concepts (*n*=155)	95.3	14.1	95.9	12.4	*ns*
Problems (*n*=150)	94.0	12.6	96.2	13.6	<.05
Total Mathematics score (*n*=140)	95.5	13.7	96.1	12.7	*ns*

Table 3.34. Achievements (mean standard scores) in Mathematics of 3rd class boys in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1997 (Level 3) and again when they were in 6th class in 2000 (Level 6).

	3rd Class (Level 3) Boys 1997		6th Class (Level 6) Boys 2000		
Mathematics Content Area	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*p*
Computation (*n*=143)	97.4	15.0	95.6	14.9	*ns*
Concepts (*n*=141)	96.9	15.2	98.5	15.9	*ns*
Problems (*n*=135)	94.0	12.2	97.9	15.3	<.001
Total Mathematics score (*n*=140)	96.4	14.2	97.6	16.0	*ns*

3.17. A COMPARISON OF THE MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENTS OF PUPILS IN SCHOOLS IN WHICH THE CURRICULUM IS DELIVERED THROUGH ENGLISH AND IN SCOILEANNA GHAELTACHTA.

The Irish language version of Form A of the Drumcondra Primary Mathematics Test (DPMT) was administered to *Breaking the Cycle* pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta. The fact that the test was administered in different languages may confound (or compromise) comparisons of the Mathematics performance of pupils made on the basis of the language of instruction used in the school. It should also be noted that the number of pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta are small at both 3rd and 6th class levels. Due to these factors, only very tentative conclusions may be drawn about the relationship between achievement in Mathematics and school type.

At 3rd class level, pupils who received their education through Irish performed at about the same level as pupils in other *Breaking the Cycle* schools (Table 3.35). Third class pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta did, however, significantly outperform pupils in other schools in the area of Computation (t= 2.5; df=309; p<.05). Interestingly, the mean total Mathematics score achieved by 3rd class pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta is only .03 of a standard deviation below that of pupils nationally (M=57.9 and M=58.4 respectively).

Sixth class pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta also performed best in the area of Mathematical Computation, and although their scores were exceeded by pupils in other schools in the remaining two content areas, as well in Mathematics overall, none of the differences at 6th class level is statistically significant. In contrast with the situation at 3rd class level, the mean Mathematics score of 6th class pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta is over one-third of a standard deviation below the national mean (*M*=52.27 and *M*=58.7 respectively).

Table 3.35. Computation, Concepts, Problems, and Total Mathematics raw scores of 3rd and 6th class pupils in Scoileanna Ghaeltachta and in other rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 2000.

	Class level			
	3rd class		**6th class**	
Mathematics content area	**Scoileanna Ghaeltachta (*n*=56)**	**Other schools (*n*=255)**	**Scoileanna Ghaeltachta (*n*=49)**	**Other schools (*n*=322)**
Computation	21.7*	19.2*	21.0	19.4
Concepts	19.4	17.8	16.5	17.7
Problems	16.1	16.3	14.7	16.4
Total test	57.9	53.7	52.3	53.9

*$p<.05$

3.18. THE MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENTS OF PUPILS BY SCHOOL

In this section, Mathematics performance is examined at the level of the individual school, rather than at aggregate level. To achieve this, schools have been categorised according to whether the mean scores of 3rd and 6th class pupils were more than one standard deviation above and below the national mean in Mathematics, more than half of a standard deviation above and below the national mean, and within one half of a standard deviation of the national mean (Table 3.36). For present purposes, schools in which pupils' mean score was within one half of a standard deviation of the national Mathematics mean are considered to be performing at about the national average. The equivalent figures for 1997 are also given in Table 3.36 for purposes of comparison.

As the table shows, at 3rd class level in 2000 there were much greater numbers of schools scoring more than half of a standard deviation, or more than one standard deviation below the mean (*n*=14) than there were scoring half of a standard deviation or one standard deviation above the mean (*n*=2) in Mathematics. Almost two-thirds of all schools (64.4%) have scores that are within half of one standard deviation of the mean. Therefore, while about two-thirds of all 3rd classes in our sample are performing at about the national average, in 8.8% of cases (*n*=4 schools), Mathematics performance is much weaker than that of pupils at this level nationally. At the upper end of the

performance scale, no school had a 3rd class which scored more than one standard deviation above the national mean.

Table 3.36. Numbers of schools in 1997 and 2000 in which pupils in 3rd and 6th classes had mean Mathematics scores that were half of a standard deviation and one standard deviation above the national mean, half of a standard deviation and one standard deviation below the national mean, and within half of a standard deviation of the national mean

	Class level 1997 (*N*=50[1])		Class level 2000 (*N*=47[2])	
	3rd class	6th class	3rd class	6th class
+ 1 *SD*	1	2	-	2
+ 1/2 *SD*	4	4	2	4
- 1 *SD*	5	3	4	6
- 1/2 *SD*	16	14	10	12
Within 1/2 *SD* of mean	23	27	29	23
Totals	49	50	45[3]	47

[1]Third class data are available only for 49 of the 50 sampled schools in 1997, as one 3rd class teacher declined to have her pupils tested.
[2]One rural school was not participating in *Breaking the Cycle* in 2000 and the results from two schools could not be processed.
[3]Two schools did not have pupils in 3rd class in 2000.

At 6th class level, performance was comparable with that at 3rd class level, with six out of 47 schools scoring more than one standard deviation below the mean, and only two schools scoring more than one standard deviation above it. Slightly less than half (48.9%) of all 6th class Mathematics mean scores are within half of one standard deviation of the national mean. Therefore, while almost half of 6th classes performed at around the national average, there is a minority of schools that could be considered to have performed very poorly in Mathematics *(n*=6), with a smaller number (*n*=2) performing very strongly.

3.19. CONCLUSION

Two key findings emerge from a review of achievement data collected in rural *Breaking the Cycl*e schools in 1997 and 2000. First, reading and Mathematics levels of 3rd and 6th class pupils are generally comparable with those of pupils nationally. In reading, test scores of 3rd class pupils in the selected schools exceeded slightly those of the norm group in both years, while the scores of 6th class pupils were slightly lower than those of the norm group in both years. In Mathematics, the scores of 3rd and 6th class pupils in our sample in both years were exceeded slightly by those of the norm group. However, as the differences are slight, there is no basis for suggesting that the overall achievements of

pupils in participating schools are significantly weaker than those of pupils nationally. An examination of the distribution of test scores in reading indicates that similar percentages of pupils in our sample and in the norm group have low and high scores (i.e., scores that are one standard deviation or more below and above the mean). This pattern is repeated for extreme scorers (i.e., those with scores below the 10th percentile and above the 90th percentile). In Mathematics, there is a slightly different picture of achievement in the selected schools. While the average test score of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils is not dissimilar to that of the norm group, the distribution of scores of the two groups differs. More than twice as many *Breaking the Cycle* pupils achieved scores that are one standard deviation below the mean as achieved scores that are one standard deviation above it. Furthermore, in 1997 and 2000 at both grade levels, less than half as many pupils achieved scores above the 90th percentile as achieved scores below the 10th percentile. It is noteworthy that the performance of pupils at 6th class level in both reading and Mathematics is weaker, relative to the norm group, than that of pupils in 3rd class. This finding is consistent with the contention that the achievement gap between pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those with more favourable backgrounds widens as they progress through the school system.

Second, reading and Mathematics levels have remained stable among 3rd and 6th class pupils since achievement data were collected in the first year of the scheme. While one might have expected participation in the scheme to have positively impacted on pupils' achievements, it should be noted that the baseline achievements (in 1997) of pupils in the selected schools were similar to those of pupils nationally. Therefore, to significantly increase their achievements between 1997 and 2000, pupils in our sample would have needed to significantly outperform pupils nationally.

The achievements of pupils should also be considered in the context of schools using the process of school planning to address what they considered to be their curriculum priorities over the life of the 5-year pilot scheme (see Chapter 2). Indeed, 104 of 115 schools (or 90.4%) that responded to a questionnaire on school planning identified the area of English as their major curriculum focus. Of these schools, 90 indicated that the improvement of pupils' reading and writing skills was their main curriculum priority, while 27 cited the improvement of pupils' oral and listening skills as their main priority. The fact that less than 10% of schools chose Mathematics as their curriculum priority might help to explain the fact that pupils' performance was slightly weaker in tests of numeracy than of literacy. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests that schools, when given access to learning support teachers, are more likely to deploy them in addressing pupils' literacy needs rather than their needs in Mathematics.

Since the application data for *Breaking the Cycle* were gathered in 1996, Ireland has experienced unprecedented economic growth which has, among other things, resulted in falling unemployment levels. Economic improvements nationally have also impacted on families served by participating rural schools. When schools were selected for participation in the scheme in 1996, larger percentages of the families they served were headed by those who were long-term unemployed,

possessed medical cards, and were in receipt of financial aid due to low farm income (Table 3.37). The largest decrease (amounting to over 8%) since 1996 occurred in relation to the percentage of families in receipt of financial assistance due to low income from farming. This is followed by a decrease in the percentage of medical card holders (5.6%), and in the percentage of families headed by the long-term unemployed (3.9%). In contrast, there was an increase of 2.6% in the percentage of pupils from lone-parent households.

Although these decreases are quite significant, it is necessary to place them in the context of national trends. For example, the national rate of long-term unemployment in 1996 was 6.9% (Ireland, 1999). This compares with an average rate in selected schools of 55.9%, eight times the national rate at that time. By spring of 2000, the national long-term unemployment rate had fallen to 1.6% (Central Statistics Office, 2000), which compares with an average rate of 52.0% in the selected schools. A comparison of these figures reveals that, by 2000, rates of long-term unemployment among families in the selected schools were more than thirty times those of the national population, whereas in 1996 long-term unemployment levels in the selected schools were only eight times those of the national population. Thus, while in absolute terms, families served by schools in *Breaking the Cycle* were better off in 2000 than they were in 1996, relative to the national population, they were faring much more poorly. The data presented in Table 3.37 were collected from principals in 1996 as part of the process of application to join *Breaking the Cycle*, and in 2000 as part of a national survey of disadvantage in primary schools carried out by the Educational Research Centre on behalf of the Department of Education and Science (Department of Education and Science, 2001).

Table 3.37. Percentage of long-term unemployed breadwinners, families in receipt of assistance due to low farm income, medical card holders, and lone-parent families served by *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1996 (*Breaking the Cycle* applications) (*N*=123) and in 2000 (national Survey of Disadvantage) (*N*=115[1]).

	% Long-term unemployed	% in receipt of assistance due to low farm income	% holding medical cards	% lone-parent families
1996	55.9% (23.5)	38.1% (28.1)	73.9% (16.7)	7.0% (5.5)
2000	52.0% (23.8)	29.7% (26.5)	68.3% (20.0)	9.6% (8.7)

[1]Not all participating schools returned a survey of disadvantage in 2000.

An examination of the values in Table 3.37 reveals that, both in 1996 and in 2000, a high percentage of families served by the schools was characterised by long-term unemployment and medical card possession – factors often associated with poverty and educational disadvantage. Therefore, the finding that pupils in the selected schools performed well in achievement tests is at odds with what would be expected of such a sample of pupils (i.e., a sample likely to be at risk of educational failure due to their poor socioeconomic backgrounds). There are several possible explanations for this finding. The first suggests that family 'poverty' (as indicated here by possession of a medical card, parental unemployment, etc.) may not inevitably be associated with poor scholastic

achievement. In rural areas, a variety of family, school and community factors may operate to alleviate the effects of material deprivation. In an attempt to estimate the broad relationship between socio-economic variables and pupil achievement across all schools, correlations between socio-economic variables in 2000 and aggregated pupil achievement in 2000 were computed (Table 3.38). It should be noted that the achievement data have been aggregated to the level of the school, and it would be preferable to have both socio-economic and achievement data at the level of the individual *pupil* in order to investigate more fully the relationship between the two.

Table 3.38. Correlations between reading and Mathematics scores of 3rd class pupils (*N*=45 schools) and 6th class pupils (*N*=47 schools) aggregated to school level and values in 2000 on variables originally used to select schools for participation in the scheme.

	% unemployed[1]	% in receipt of assistance due to low farm income	% medical card	% lone-parent families
3rd class reading	-.15	-.28	-.04	.03
3rd class Mathematics	-.26	-.22	-.25	-.01
6th class reading	-.13	-.17	-.06	.22
6th class Mathematics	-.20	-.16	-.04	.24

[1]Schools were originally selected using data on *long-term unemployment*, but this variable was found to be problematic in the survey of disadvantage in 2000, and so *unemployment* is used here.

None of the correlations reported in Table 3.38 is statistically significant. While (excepting the lone-parent family variable) all correlations are in the expected direction (i.e., achievement decreases as the percentage of families characterised by each of the indicators increases), the relationship is not significant in the case of any of the four variables. The lowest correlations of all are those between achievement and the percentage of lone-parent families. The absence of an association between achievement and poverty-related variables in a rural context has been noted previously. Weir (1999) reported the results of similar correlational analyses performed between variables used in rural schools' applications for *Breaking the Cycle* in 1996 and pupils' test scores in 1997. These analyses also revealed an absence of a relationship between each of the application variables and pupils' literacy and numeracy test scores. However, in the latter study as well as in the current one, the data were aggregated to school level, and without the availability of individual level data, it is difficult to obtain a good estimate of the true extent of the interrelationships.

An alternative potential explanation of the achievement levels found in the present study relates to the distribution of disadvantage in rural areas. On the basis of a combined achievement and poverty measure (derived from reading test scores and measures of family poverty), Kellaghan et al. (1995) estimated that 60.7% of all disadvantaged pupils live in areas with populations of less than 10,000 people. Yet, in 1993/94, less than 5% of all pupils in these areas were in schools that were designated as disadvantaged by the Department of Education. It may be the case that using the school as the unit of identification is inappropriate in identifying pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in

rural areas. It is possible that such pupils are widely dispersed across a great number of small schools, whereas in urban locations, schools have high concentrations of disadvantaged pupils in a relatively small number of schools. This explanation suggests that it may be more appropriate in rural areas to use the pupil, rather than the school, in attempts to identify pupils at risk. If, indeed, rural pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are widely dispersed across a large number of schools, then the mean achievement of pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools would not be expected to differ much from the national average, as such pupils would only make a minor contribution to the school's mean score. Furthermore, the concentration of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in a school may have effects on achievement over and above the effects of individual background factors on achievement. Some commentators believe that the social context of the school is of key importance in achievement, and that the disadvantages associated with poverty are exacerbated when there are high concentrations of pupils from poor backgrounds in a school (Patterson, 1991; Smyth, 1999; Willms, 1985). If this contention is true – and if in rural areas disadvantaged pupils are widely dispersed across a large number of schools – one would not expect to find the same deleterious effect on average achievement as one would in a large urban school in which the majority of pupils come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Another explanation is that the majority of rural pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds attend larger schools in small towns[5]. However, it is impossible to know if this is the case without collecting appropriate data. It seems reasonable to conclude that the only reliable way to assess levels of disadvantage in rural areas is to use a combined poverty and achievement/attainment measure at school level. It should be noted, though, this approach will only serve as a means of identification if pupils are concentrated within schools. A first step to determine if this is so would involve a study of the distribution of achievement in an adequately sized sample of schools. If it is found to be case that low-achieving pupils from poor backgrounds are distributed across schools in small numbers, rather than being concentrated in some schools (which was the rationale underlying *Breaking the Cycle*), then future attempts to target resources at disadvantaged pupils in rural areas may need to focus on the identification of individual pupils rather than on schools. Finally, the achievement data described here suggest that the procedures used to select rural schools for participation in *Breaking the Cycle* were unsatisfactory, in that they failed to identify pupils who were both materially disadvantaged and had low achievement levels.

[5] Only rural schools with four teachers or fewer were invited to apply to join *Breaking the Cycle*. Therefore, there are no schools with more than four teachers participating in the scheme.

4. ATTITUDES OF 6th CLASS PUPILS

A questionnaire was administered to all 6th class pupils in schools in which achievements were measured in 2000. The questionnaire was identical to that used to assess 6th class pupils' attitudes in 1997, and was designed to elicit information on attitudes to school and self, and their educational and vocational aspirations and expectations. In this section, the responses of pupils in the two years will be compared. It would be reasonable to expect that, as the scheme evolved over the first few years, it would have a positive impact on pupils' attitudes towards school, and on their educational expectations and aspirations. The collective responses of boys and girls to each item in the questionnaire will also be compared to investigate whether attitudes differed on the basis of pupil gender. In similar analyses in 1997 (Eivers & Weir, 1998), boys were found to have less positive attitudes than girls towards school and education generally. Finally, in Section 4.9, the results of analyses aimed at discovering whether achievement is related to attitudes to school and schoolwork, scholastic self-concept, self-esteem and vocational aspirations are reported.

To assist pupils who had reading difficulties, an administrator read aloud each questionnaire item and the range of possible responses, explaining how to complete each item in turn. To ensure that pupils understood how to complete the questionnaire, pupils completed two sample items prior to the administration of the questionnaire proper. Apart from the examples, there were 29 items, all but one of which required pupils to read/listen to a statement or question and to tick the most appropriate response from three or four response options. There was one open-ended item, which invited pupils to write the name of the job they would like to do as an adult.

The questionnaire consisted of five short sections. The content of each section is as follows:

Educational aspirations and expectations (Section 1: items 1–3)
Attitude toward school and attributions for success at school (Section 2: items 4–10)
Perception of competence in 11 curriculum areas (Section 3: items 11–21)
Self-esteem, popularity with peers, home atmosphere (Section 4: items 22–28)
Vocational aspirations (Section 5: item 29).

4.1. QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSE RATES.

Of a possible total of 388 pupils in 6th class in 2000, 376 (97%) completed the questionnaire. The remaining 12 pupils (3%) were absent from school at the time of administration. The rate of completion of individual questionnaire items was high, with an overall response rate in 2000 of 99% for the multiple-choice items (items 1–28) and 98% for item 29, the open-ended item which required pupils to indicate their career preference (Table 4.1). For purposes of comparison, response rates for 1997 are also given in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Numbers and percentages of pupils in the 6th class cohorts in 1997 and 2000 that answered individual items of the pupil questionnaire.

		1997		2000	
Item number and description		***N***	**%**	***N***	**%**
1	Liking for school	430	100	373	99.2
2	Educational aspirations	429	99.8	375	99.7
3	Educational expectations	430	100	375	99.7
4	Pride in work	430	100	376	100
5	Like to be asked questions	430	100	375	99.7
6	Feel am doing well	430	100	374	99.5
7	Important to do well	430	100	376	100
8	Need to be smart to do well	430	100	373	99.2
9	Need to be lucky to do well	429	99.8	372	98.9
10	Need lots of hard work to do well	430	100	376	100
11	Self-rating in Maths	429	99.8	376	100
12	Self-rating in Irish reading	426	99.1	368	97.9
13	Self-rating in Irish writing	426	99.1	366	97.3
14	Self-rating in English reading	430	100	374	99.5
15	Self-rating in English writing	429	99.8	375	99.7
16	Self-rating in History	430	100	375	99.7
17	Self-rating in Geography	430	100	375	99.7
18	Self-rating in Science / nature studies	402	93.5	348	92.6
19	Self-rating in Art / craft	414	96.3	372	98.9
20	Self-rating in Music	430	100	376	100
21	Self-rating in Sport	430	100	376	100
22	Lots of fun to be with	430	100	376	100
23	Not nice looking	428	99.5	375	99.7
24	Good at sport	428	99.5	369	98.1
25	Lonely at school	429	99.8	374	99.5
26	Lots of fun with parents	430	100	376	100
27	No attention at home	429	99.8	375	99.7
28	Popular with classmates	430	100	376	100
29	Preferred occupation	430	100	369	98.1

4.2. PUPILS' EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS.

Items 1–3 in the pupil questionnaire concerned pupils' liking for school and their educational aspirations and expectations. In 2000, a majority of pupils indicated that they liked school. Over a quarter, however, indicated that they disliked it (Table 4.2). In 2000, there was a slightly (but not significantly) greater percentage of pupils than in 1997 who indicated that they liked school and a slightly smaller percentage that indicated that they disliked it. This indicates that pupils' liking for school – something which might have been expected to increase with the experience of the scheme – did not increase between 1997 and 2000.

Table 4.2. Percentages of 6th class pupils in 1997 and in 2000 reporting how much they like school.

	How much do you like school?			
Year	**Like a lot**	**Like**	**Dislike**	**Dislike a lot**
1997	10.0%	58.6%	20.0%	11.4%
2000	11.5%	62.7%	16.6%	9.1%

Comparative data on pupils' liking for school are available from the National Assessment of English Reading among 5th class pupils in 1998 (Cosgrove, Kellaghan, Forde & Morgan, 2000). As Table 4.3 shows, *Breaking the Cycle* pupils appear to like school *more* than do pupils in the national sample (χ^2=29.7; *df*=1; *p*<.001). However, since there are no differences between *Breaking the Cycle* pupils' liking for school in 1997 and 2000, it is not possible to attribute the more positive attitudes demonstrated by pupils to participation in the scheme.

Table 4.3. Percentage of pupils choosing each response option in an item assessing liking for school in the National Assessment of English Reading (1998) and in the evaluation of *Breaking the Cycle* (2000).

	Response option			
Pupil sample	**Like a lot**	**Like**	**Dislike**	**Dislike a lot**
1998 English reading Assessment (*N*=3,865)	10.2%	49.5%	20.5%	19.7%
Breaking the Cycle 2000 (*N*=376)	11.5%	62.7%	16.6%	9.1%

Pupils were asked how far they would like to go in school and how far they thought they would *actually* go. A small percentage indicated that they would like to leave school having completed primary school (1.3%), while a tiny percentage (0.5%) thought that they would actually leave school at that point (Table 4.4). A further 3.7% indicated that they would like to do the Junior Certificate Examination, while 6.9% indicated that they thought they would actually leave after taking it. More than one-fifth (22.1%) claimed that they would like to do the Leaving Certificate Examination, while more than one-third (37.9%) thought they would actually do it. A very high percentage of pupils (72.8%) said they would like to go to college or university, while slightly more than half expected to proceed to university. The percentages of pupils wishing to take the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate Examinations are exceeded by the percentages who feel that they will actually reach these levels of attainment. In contrast, the percentage of pupils wishing to proceed to third level exceeds the percentage of pupils who think that option realistic. The educational aspirations of pupils in 2000 differed from those of pupils in 1997. In 2000, a greater percentage of pupils wished to proceed to third-level (χ^2=11.0; *df*=1; *p*<.001), and expected to proceed to third-level (χ^2=6.0; *df*=1; *p*<.05) than was the case in 1997. It seems, therefore, that the 6th class cohort in 2000 were more ambitious than their counterparts in 1997.

Table 4.4. Percentages of 6th class pupils in 1997 and 2000 reporting how far they would like to go in school and how far they think they will actually go in school.

	How far would you like to go in school?			
Year	Finish primary school	Do the Junior Certificate	Do the Leaving Certificate	Go to college/ university
1997	2.3%	6.3%	29.8%	61.5%
2000	1.3%	3.7%	22.1%	72.8%
	How far do you think you will actually go in school?			
Year	Finish primary school	Do the Junior Certificate	Do the Leaving Certificate	Go to college/ university
1997	1.2%	7.9%	45.1%	45.8%
2000	0.5%	6.9%	37.9%	54.7%

Comparative data are also available from the 1998 National Assessment of English reading (Cosgrove et al., 2000) on the educational expectations and aspirations of pupils (Table 4.5). As Table 4.5 shows, the educational aspirations of pupils in the national sample and those in *Breaking the Cycle* are fairly similar, with the greatest difference (of 3.6%) occurring in relation to the percentages wishing to leave school following the Leaving Certificate. However, there are greater differences between the expectations of pupils in the two groups. More pupils in the national sample than in *Breaking the Cycle* thought they would actually proceed to third-level (χ^2=12.9; *df*=1; *p*<.001), and more *Breaking the Cycle* pupils than in the national sample expected to stay in school until the Leaving Certificate (χ^2=8.2; *df*=1; *p*<.01). Finally, the discrepancy between the educational aspirations and expectations of pupils is greater among *Breaking the Cycle* pupils: 18.1% fewer *Breaking the Cycle* pupils expected to go to college than wished to go to college, while the comparative figure for the national sample is 11.6%.

Table 4.5. Percentages[1] of pupils choosing each response option in an item assessing educational aspirations and expectations in the National Assessment of English Reading (1998) and in the evaluation of *Breaking the Cycle* (2000).

	How far would you like to go in school?			
	Finish primary school	Do the Junior Certificate	Do the Leaving Certificate	Go to college/ university
1998 English reading Assessment (*N*=3,333)	2.5%	3.1%	18.5%	75.9%
Breaking the Cycle 2000 (*N*=376)	1.3%	3.7%	22.1%	72.8%
	How far do you think you will actually go in school?			
	Finish primary school	Do the Junior Certificate	Do the Leaving Certificate	Go to college/ university
1998 English reading Assessment (*N*=3,064)	1.3%	3.9%	30.5%	64.3%
Breaking the Cycle 2000 (*N*=376)	0.5%	6.9%	37.9%	54.7%

[1]The option "don't know" was included in the pupil questionnaire in the 1998 National Assessment, and so the percentages reported here were recalculated omitting these responses to facilitate comparisons with data from *Breaking the Cycle.*

4.3. PUPILS' ATTITUDES TO SCHOOL AND SCHOOLWORK.

In a set of items relating to attitudes towards school and schoolwork, pupils were required to indicate, by ticking one of four response options, whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with each of four statements. Table 4.6 shows the percentage of pupils choosing each response option for each of the statements.

More than 4 out of every 5 pupils in 2000 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I am proud of my school work". Only a very small percentage strongly disagreed with it. Pupils were less positive about being asked questions in class. Slightly less than two-thirds liked it but the remainder did not welcome questions. When pupils were asked to judge their own performance at school, a large majority (88.5%) said that they were doing well. The majority is even larger when pupils were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a statement concerning the importance of doing well at school. Almost all (94%) either strongly agreed or agreed that it was important for them to do well. A comparison of the percentages of pupils endorsing each response option in 1997 and 2000 reveals that greater percentages of pupils in 2000 than in 1997 strongly agreed that they felt they were doing well at school (χ^2=4.0; *df*=1; *p*<.05). This is encouraging and may well reflect the impact of participation in the scheme.

Table 4.6. Percentages of pupils in 6th class in 1997 and 2000 reporting how they feel about schoolwork.

	I am proud of my school work			
Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1997	13.0%	69.1%	15.3%	2.6%
2000	16.0%	69.9%	12.5%	1.6%
	I like to be asked questions in class			
Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1997	13.3%	45.1%	31.4%	10.2%
2000	12.8%	52.3%	27.2%	7.7%
	I feel I'm doing well at school			
Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1997	15.3%	72.6%	10.2%	1.9%
2000	21.7%	66.8%	9.6%	1.9%
	It is important to me to do well at school			
Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1997	66.0%	30.9%	2.3%	0.7%
2000	71.5%	22.5%	2.5%	0.5%

4.4. ATTRIBUTIONS FOR SCHOLASTIC SUCCESS AMONG PUPILS.

To examine their attributions for success at school, pupils were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of three statements. The percentages of pupils choosing each response option for each statement are shown in Table 4.7.

In 2000, a greater percentage of pupils (49.2%) strongly agreed with the statement that "To do well at school you need to do lots of hard work and study at home" than agreed strongly with the other two attributional items ["To do well at school you need to be very smart" (17.2%) and "To do well at school you need to be lucky" (5.6%)]. Of the three attributional statements, the one which invited the greatest number of "strongly disagree" responses was that which stated that luck was necessary to do well at school (43.3%), followed by the statement that success at school requires you to be 'smart' (15.3%). On the other hand, only 4.0% of pupils strongly disagreed that success at school depends on doing lots of hard work and study at home. Pupils' responses to the latter item changed little between 1997 and 2000, but significant differences were observed between the 1997 and 2000 cohorts in their responses to the other two items. In 2000, a greater percentage of pupils strongly agreed that to do well in school you need to be "smart" (χ^2=7.8; *df*=1; $p<.01$). Consistent with this was a decrease in the percentage of pupils strongly disagreeing that you need to be lucky to do well at school (χ^2=5.3; *df*=1; $p<.05$).

Responses to these items seem to indicate that pupils in the 2000 cohort were somewhat more fatalistic in their attributions for scholastic success than were their 1997 counterparts, as greater percentages of them tended to attribute success at school to factors outside their control. Similar findings were reported by Hayes and Kernan (2001), who found that seven-year-old children attending schools designated as disadvantaged had a significantly lower mean score on a scale designed to measure locus of control (meaning that their locus of control was more external than internal) than did children attending non-designated schools.

Table 4.7. Percentages of 6th class pupils in 1997 and 2000 expressing varying degrees of agreement with statements relating to attributions for success at schoolwork.

	To do well at school you need to be very smart			
Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1997	10.2%	30.0%	44.5%	15.3%
2000	17.2%	26.5%	41.0%	15.3%
	To do well at school you need to be lucky			
Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1997	3.7%	8.9%	35.7%	51.7%
2000	5.6%	10.5%	40.6%	43.3%
	To do well at school you need to do lots of hard work and study at home			
Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1997	48.1%	39.1%	9.1%	3.7%
2000	49.2%	39.4%	7.4%	4.0%

4.5. PUPILS' EVALUATIONS OF THEIR OWN PERFORMANCE AT SCHOOL.

Pupils were asked in a series of items to rate their own performance in different types of schoolwork relative to others in their class. For each type of schoolwork, they were asked to say whether they thought they were "near the top", "around the middle" or "near the bottom" of their class. The percentages of pupils endorsing each response option for each type of schoolwork are reported in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8. Percentage of 6th class pupils in 1997 and 2000 who considered themselves to be near the top, around the middle, or near the bottom of their class at different types of schoolwork.

		Response option		
Type of schoolwork	**Year**	***Near the top***	***Around the middle***	***Near the bottom***
Mathematics	1997	29.1%	58.8%	12.1%
	2000	24.5%	65.2%	10.4%
Irish reading	1997	29.8%	52.3%	17.8%
	2000	30.4%	46.7%	22.8%
Irish writing	1997	23.7%	57.0%	19.2%
	2000	27.3%	52.9%	20.8%
English reading	1997	59.1%	36.7%	4.2%
	2000	54.3%	42.0%	3.7%
English writing	1997	52.4%	43.1%	4.4%
	2000	45.3%	50.7%	4.0%
History	1997	24.0%	59.1%	17.0%
	2000	30.4%	55.5%	14.1%
Geography	1997	35.1%	51.6%	13.3%
	2000	37.1%	53.1%	9.9%
Science/Nature studies	1997	27.4%	55.4%	17.2%
	2000	33.0%	54.9%	12.1%
Art and Craft	1997	38.4%	46.6%	15.0%
	2000	36.0%	49.5%	14.5%
Music	1997	34.7%	36.0%	29.3%
	2000	39.1%	31.1%	29.8%
Sport	1997	57.0%	31.4%	11.6%
	2000	52.9%	36.2%	10.9%

In 2000, across all types of schoolwork, the greatest percentage of pupils rated their performance as being near the top of the class in the area of English reading (54.3%), followed by Sport (52.9%) and English writing (45.3%). The subject areas which attracted the greatest percentage of 'near the bottom' responses from pupils were Music (29.8%), followed by Irish reading (22.8%) and Irish writing (20.8%). [The self-evaluations of pupils in the areas of English reading and Mathematics will be related to their actual performance on tests of achievement in these subject areas in Section 4.9.3 of this chapter.] As Table 4.8 shows, pupils' self-evaluations in 2000 largely resembled those in 1997, with only minor repositioning of subject areas in terms of perceived competency. It is worth pointing out that pupils in both 1997 and 2000 considered English to be their strongest subject area. However, it should also be noted that when pupils complete self-rating scales they may be subject to a "better than average" effect (i.e., their ratings tend be distributed towards the positive end of the scale) (Myers, 1993). It is clear from the ratings given by pupils in the present study that this overrepresentation at the upper end of the performance scale has, indeed, occurred. Furthermore, pupils in the eight scoileanna Ghaeltachta were less likely to rate themselves as "near the bottom" of the class in either Irish writing (12.5% compared with 21.8% of pupils in schools in which teaching is through English) or in Irish reading (6.3% compared with 25%) (Table 4.9). However, pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta were also slightly less likely to rate themselves as near the top of the class in either English writing (35.4% compared with 46.6% of pupils in other schools) or English reading (44.7% compared with 56.5% of pupils in other schools).

Table 4.9. Percentage of pupils in scoileanna Ghaeltachta and other rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools who think they are near the top, around the middle, or near the bottom of their class in English and Irish reading and writing.

	Scoileanna Ghaeltachta (*N*=48 pupils)			Other rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools (*N*=311 pupils)		
Subject	***Near the top***	***Around the middle***	***Near the bottom***	***Near the top***	***Around the middle***	***Near the bottom***
English reading	44.7%	51.1%	4.3%	56.5%	40.3%	3.2%
English writing	35.4%	58.3%	6.3%	46.6%	49.8%	3.2%
Irish reading	39.6%	54.2%	6.3%	29.9%	44.7%	25.0%
Irish writing	31.3%	56.3%	12.5%	26.7%	50.8%	21.8%

4.6. SELF-CONCEPT, SELF-ESTEEM AND PERCEPTION OF HOME ATMOSPHERE AMONG PUPILS

Several items designed to assess pupils' self-concepts and self-esteem, and their perception of the atmosphere in their homes were included in the pupil questionnaire. Table 4.10 shows the percentage of pupils expressing varying levels of agreement with each of a variety of statements designed to investigate these issues.

Most pupils in 2000 agreed (67.8%) or strongly agreed (18.4%) that they are "a lot of fun to be with". In evaluating their own personal appearance, more than one-third agreed with the statement "I am not as nice looking as most people". Those who did not agree were less likely to disagree strongly (13.3%) than to merely disagree (43.5%). More than one-third of all pupils strongly agreed that they are good at sport. A further 44.7% agreed that they were good at sport, while only 20.8% disagreed. The number of pupils who claimed to feel lonely at school was small. Four out of every five pupils (81.3%) disagreed with the statement "I often feel lonely at school". However, this left a sizeable minority (13.1%) who agreed, and a further 5.6% who strongly agreed, that they often feel lonely at school.

Two items concerned pupils' relationships with their parents and the atmosphere in pupils' homes. Almost half (39.1%) of pupils strongly agreed that they and their parents "have a lot of fun together" while a further 46.8% were in agreement. Of the 14.1% of pupils who disagreed, about one pupil in twenty (5.9%) strongly disagreed. Most pupils (89.6%) disagreed with the statement "No one pays much attention to me at home", but one pupil in ten claimed not to not receive much attention at home, with 3.7% of these strongly endorsing the statement.

Finally, an item designed to elicit pupils' perceptions of their own popularity with peers ("I'm popular with my classmates") revealed that the majority of pupils (80.3%) perceived themselves as popular. However, almost one pupil in five (19.7%) considered him or herself to be unpopular, with 5.1% of these strongly disagreeing that they were popular with their classmates.

As was the case with many items in the pupil questionnaire, the responses of the 1997 and 2000 cohorts were broadly similar. There were, however, some differences between the 1997 and 2000 responses. Of the seven items in Table 4.10, pupils' responses to five were similar in 1997 and 2000. However, the percentage of pupils strongly agreeing that they were good at sport decreased between 1997 and 2000 (χ^2=4.7; *df*=1; p<.05), while the percentage agreeing that they often felt lonely at school (χ^2=4.2; *df*=1; p<.05) increased significantly between 1997 and 2000.

Table 4.10. Percentages of 6th class pupils in 1997 and 2000 expressing varying degrees of agreement with items related to self-concept, self-esteem and perception of home atmosphere.

		Response option			
Questionnaire item	**Year**	**Strongly agree**	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
I'm a lot of fun to be with	1997	18.1%	70.2%	9.8%	1.9%
	2000	18.4%	67.8%	12.2%	1.6%
I'm not as nice looking as most people	1997	10.3%	39.3%	37.5%	12.9%
	2000	8.3%	34.9%	43.5%	13.3%
I think I'm good at sports	1997	42.1%	40.2%	11.7%	6.1%
	2000	34.4%	44.7%	15.4%	5.4%
I often feel lonely at school	1997	5.8%	8.4%	36.2%	49.5%
	2000	5.6%	13.1%	35.0%	46.3%
My parents and I have a lot of fun together	1997	37.9%	45.3%	12.1%	4.7%
	2000	39.1%	46.8%	8.2%	5.9%
No one pays much attention to me at home	1997	4.2%	6.8%	40.7%	48.3%
	2000	3.7%	6.7%	38.7%	50.9%
I'm popular with my classmates	1997	19.5%	56.4%	18.1%	6.0%
	2000	21.5%	58.8%	14.6%	5.1%

4.7. THE VOCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF PUPILS.

The final item in the pupil questionnaire was open-ended, inviting pupils to write the name of the job they would like to do when they grew up. The response rate for this item was almost 98%. As responses to this item varied considerably, each pupil's response was assigned a code to indicate a general occupational category. For comparability of responses between 1997 and 2000, it was decided to use the categories which were developed to code responses to this item in 1997. The 14 categories were as follows: "Professional", "Fantasy / unrealistic", "Female trades", "Male trades", "Services", "Armed forces / law enforcement", "Creative / artistic", "Miscellaneous", "Childcare", "Don't know", "Animal-oriented jobs", "Technology", "Travel industry", and "Agricultural / outdoor work". Table 4.11 shows the percentages of pupils choosing jobs in each occupational category and gives examples of jobs specified by pupils within each category.

The most popular type of job, chosen by four pupils in every ten, was "professional", and included jobs such as doctor and lawyer. The next most popular job-type, chosen by one pupil in six was what could be considered a fantasy-type job, such as pop-star and professional footballer. More than one pupil in ten specified a male-typed "trade" (e.g., carpentry or plumbing), while 5.4% specified a female-typed "trade" (e.g., hairdresser, beautician). The next most popular categories were

"Technology" chosen by 5.1% of pupils, and "Armed forces / Law enforcement" chosen by just under 5% of pupils. Jobs falling within the remaining occupational categories were chosen by small percentages of pupils (less than 5.0% in each case). The least commonly occurring preferences were "Services" (1.4% of pupils), and "Agricultural / outdoor work" (0.5% of pupils).

There was not a great deal of difference between the occupational preferences of the 6th class cohorts in 1997 and 2000, and, indeed, the four most popular categories in 1997 also represented the most popular categories in 2000. There were some differences, however, with more pupils in 2000 than in 1997 opting for professional jobs (χ^2=8.7; *df*=1; *p*<.01). Also, preferences for work in the services industry (e.g., shop or restaurant work) decreased between 1997 and 2000 (χ^2=10.2; *df*=1; *p*<.01). The fact that a significantly greater percentage of pupils chose jobs which could be classified as "professional" in 2000 is consistent with the increases reported earlier in the percentage of pupils wishing to, and expecting to, remain in the education system as far as third-level. Indeed, it is possible that participation in the scheme has led to increases in pupils' educational and occupational expectations of themselves.

Table 4.11. Percentages of pupils in 6th class in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1997 (*N*=430) and 2000 (*N*=376) choosing jobs in a variety of occupational categories.

Occupational category	**% of pupils in 1997**	**% of pupils in 2000**
Professional (e.g., doctor, lawyer, teacher, engineer)	30.2%	40.4%
Fantasy / unrealistic (e.g., pop star, professional footballer)	16.6%	15.2%
Male trades (e.g., builder, mechanic, plumber)	12.6%	13.0%
Female trades (e.g., hairdresser, beautician, air-hostess)	7.0%	5.4%
Technology (e.g., computer programmer, software developer)	2.5%	5.1%
Armed forces / law enforcement (e.g., Garda, join the army)	5.3%	4.9%
Miscellaneous (e.g., well-paid job)	3.8%	4.9%
Creative / artistic (e.g., artist, fashion designer)	4.3%	2.7%
Childcare (e.g., crèche assistant / owner)	3.3%	2.4%
Animal-oriented jobs (e.g., work with horses)	2.0%	2.2%
Don't know	3.0%	1.9%
Services (e.g., shop-work, hotel-work)	6.0%	1.4%
Agricultural / outdoor work (e.g., farmer, fisherman, gardener)	3.3%	0.5%
Travel industry (e.g., tour guide)	0.3%	—

4.8. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE ATTITUDES OF PUPILS.

The collective responses of boys and girls to each item in the pupil questionnaire were compared to investigate whether attitudes differed on the basis of gender. Comparisons were based on the questionnaire responses of 188 girls and 170 boys, and gender differences were found in the case of 12 of the 28 scaled questionnaire items (Table 4.12).

Overall, 6th class boys had a less positive attitude to school than girls, with boys expressing significantly more dislike for school. Girls also had higher educational aspirations and expectations, with more girls expressing both a desire to go to college or university, and an expectation that they would actually proceed to third-level. Comparative data on 5th class pupils' liking for school are available from the 1998 National Assessment of English reading (Cosgrove et al., 2000). As Table 4.13 shows, in both studies, greater percentages of boys than girls indicated that they disliked school a lot, and smaller percentages indicated that they liked school a lot. It appears that boys' greater dislike of school is not something which is unique to *Breaking the Cycle* schools, but is found also among pupils nationally. The current observations are also consistent with those of an earlier Irish study of scholastic self-concept in 6th class pupils (Kellaghan & Fontes, 1988) which revealed the self-ratings of girls on motivational and attitudinal characteristics to be higher than those of boys.

Table 4.12. Mean scores of girls (*n*=188) and boys (*n*=170) on all 6th class pupil questionnaire items in 2000, with items which revealed significant gender differences presented in bold.

Questionnaire Items	**Girls**		**Boys**		
	Mean	***SD***	**Mean**	***SD***	***Diff***
How much do you like school (1=like a lot, 4=dislike a lot)	**1.96**	**0.52**	**2.49**	**0.87**	***p*<.0001**
How far would you like to go in school (1=finish primary, 4=go to college / university)	**3.81**	**0.44**	**3.55**	**0.78**	***p*<.0001**
How far do you think you will actually go in school (1=finish primary, 4=go to college / university)	**3.62**	**0.54**	**3.34**	**0.67**	***p*<.0001**
I'm proud of my school work (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	1.93	0.56	2.04	0.60	*ns*
I like to be asked questions in class (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	2.23	0.83	2.38	0.84	*ns*
I feel I'm doing well in school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	1.86	0.63	1.97	0.60	*ns*
It is important to me to do well in school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**1.25**	**0.46**	**1.38**	**0.61**	***p*<.05**
To do well in school you need to be smart (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	2.65	0.99	2.55	1.16	*ns*
To do well in school you need to be lucky (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	3.27	0.80	3.20	0.90	*ns*
To do well in school you need to do lots of hard work and study at home (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	1.62	0.75	1.69	0.84	*ns*
I'm a lot of fun to be with (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	1.94	0.58	1.99	0.63	*ns*
I'm not as nice looking as most people (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**2.53**	**0.82**	**2.79**	**0.77**	***p*<.005**
I think I'm good at sports (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	2.09	0.96	1.92	1.31	*ns*
I often feel lonely at school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**3.13**	**0.94**	**3.33**	**0.89**	***p*<.05**
My parents and I have a lot of fun together (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	1.78	0.76	1.84	0.87	*ns*
No one pays much attention to me at home (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	3.42	0.72	3.28	0.81	*ns*
I'm popular with my classmates (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	2.08	0.75	1.96	0.73	*ns*
Maths (1=near the top, 3= near the bottom)	1.89	0.54	1.81	0.62	*ns*
Irish Reading (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.84**	**0.86**	**2.02**	**0.71**	***p*<.05**
Irish Writing (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.79**	**0.82**	**2.16**	**0.79**	***p*<.0001**
English Reading (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.42**	**0.52**	**1.56**	**0.61**	***p*<.05**
English Writing (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	1.56	0.56	1.63	0.59	*ns*
History (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	1.86	0.58	1.82	0.71	*ns*
Geography (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	1.77	0.78	1.72	0.63	*ns*
Science/Nature Studies (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	1.76	0.60	1.91	0.98	*ns*
Arts and Crafts (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.69**	**0.62**	**1.87**	**0.72**	***p*<.05**
Music (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.62**	**0.72**	**2.25**	**0.82**	***p*<.0001**
Sport (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.74**	**0.71**	**1.41**	**0.61**	***p*<.0001**

Table 4.13. Percentages of pupils, by gender, choosing each response option in an item assessing liking for school in the National Assessment of English Reading (1998) and in the evaluation of *Breaking the Cycle* (2000).

		How much do you like school?			
Pupil sample	Gender	**Like a lot**	**Like**	**Dislike**	**Dislike a lot**
	Male (*N*=1,955)	5.2%	42.8%	24.2%	27.8%
1998 Assessment	Female (*N*=1,910)	15.4%	56.4%	16.8%	11.4%
	Total (*N*=3,865)	10.2%	49.5%	20.5%	19.7%
	Male (*N*=170)	8.4%	50.9%	24.0%	16.8%
Breaking the Cycle 2000	Female (*N*=188)	14.4%	76.1%	8.5%	1.1%
	Total (*N*=358)	11.8%	64.0%	15.7%	8.4%

National English reading survey data are also available on boys' and girls' educational aspirations and expectations (Tables 4.14 and 4.15).

Table 4.14. Percentages[1] of pupils, by gender, choosing each response option in an item assessing educational aspirations in the National Assessment of English Reading (1998) and in the evaluation of *Breaking the Cycle* (2000).

		How far would you like to go in school?			
Pupil sample	Gender	**Primary**	**Junior Certificate**	**Leaving Certificate**	**College / university**
	Male (*N*=1,631)	4.0%	3.7%	23.4%	68.9%
1998 Assessment	Female (*N*=1,702)	1.1%	2.5%	13.9%	82.5%
	Total (*N*=3,333)	2.5%	3.1%	18.5%	75.9%
	Male (*N*=170)	2.4%	5.3%	29.4%	62.4%
Breaking the Cycle 2000	Female (*N*=188)	0.5%	0.5%	16.5%	82.4%
	Total (*N*=358)	1.4%	2.8%	22.6%	73.0%

[1]The option "don't know" was included in the pupil questionnaire in the 1998 National Assessment, and so the percentages reported here were recalculated omitting these responses to facilitate comparisons with data from *Breaking the Cycle.*

Table 4.15. Percentages[1] of pupils, by gender, choosing each response option in an item assessing educational expectations in the National Assessment of English Reading (1998) and in the evaluation of *Breaking the Cycle* (2000).

		How far do you think you will actually go in school?			
Pupil sample	Gender	**Primary**	**Junior Certificate**	**Leaving Certificate**	**College / university**
	Male (*N*=1,519)	2.4%	6.1%	33.8%	57.7%
1998 Assessment	Female (*N*=1,545)	0.2%	1.8%	27.2%	70.7%
	Total (*N*=3,064)	1.3%	3.9%	30.5%	64.3%
	Male (*N*=170)	0.6%	9.5%	45.6%	44.4%
Breaking the Cycle 2000	Female (*N*=188)	-	2.7%	32.4%	64.9%
	Total (*N*=358)	0.3%	5.9%	38.5%	55.3%

[1]The option "don't know" was included in the pupil questionnaire in the 1998 National Assessment, and so the percentages reported here were recalculated omitting these responses to facilitate comparisons with data from *Breaking the Cycle.*

As Table 4.14 shows, girls in the National Assessment had higher educational aspirations than boys (e.g., more girls wished to proceed to third-level) (χ^2=83.3; *df*=1; *p*<.001), and the same was true for *Breaking the Cycle* schools (χ^2=17.1; *df*=1; *p*<.001). However, there were no significant differences between the percentages of boys and girls in *Breaking the Cycle* schools and those in the national sample in their educational aspirations.

The educational *expectations* of girls in the national sample and in *Breaking the Cycle* schools also exceeded those of boys (Table 4.15). While 8.5% of boys in the national sample indicated that they expected to continue in school only until the end of primary school or until they had taken the Junior Certificate Examination, only 2.0% of girls did so (χ^2=64.1; *df*=1; *p*<.001), and while 70.7% of girls expected to go to college, only 57.7% of boys had such an expectation (χ^2=55.8; *df*=1; *p*<.001). The situation in *Breaking the Cycle* schools was similar, with significantly more boys than girls expecting to proceed only as far as Junior Certificate (χ^2=7.2; *df*=1; *p*<.01), and a greater percentage of girls than of boys expecting to go on to third-level (χ^2=14.4; *df*=1; *p*<.001).

Boys and girls in *Breaking the Cycle* schools also differed in the importance they placed on scholastic success (Table 4.12), with girls rating success at school as being more important to them. However, boys and girls did not differ on items relating to pride in schoolwork, welcoming questions in class, and feeling that they were doing well in school. Finally, there were no gender differences on any of the items concerning attributions for scholastic success.

Analysis of pupils' evaluations of their own strengths and weaknesses in various subject areas also revealed several gender differences (Table 4.12). Girls' ratings of themselves in five of the eleven subject areas, namely Irish reading, Irish Writing, English reading, Arts and Crafts and Music were more positive than those of boys (girls rated themselves towards the top of the class more often in these subjects than boys). Boys, however, rated their own performance in Sport more favourably than girls.

There was no significant gender difference in pupils' perceptions of themselves in terms of how much fun they were to be with, or how popular they were with their peers. Nor did boys and girls differ in their perception of home atmosphere. Girls, however, appeared to have slightly lower self-esteem, as more girls than boys agreed that they were not as nice-looking as most people. Girls were also less likely than boys to disagree that they often felt lonely at school.

For purposes of comparison, Table 4.16 presents gender differences found in pupils' responses to individual questionnaire items in either 1997 or 2000. Several gender differences in boys' and girls' liking for school, their educational aspirations and expectations, and their sense of self-esteem in 2000 were similar to those in 1997. However, other differences in 1997 relating to attributions for scholastic success and perceptions of home-atmosphere were not found in 2000. It can also be seen that girls were more likely than boys to agree that it was important for them to do well at school in 2000, whereas this was not the case in 1997.

Table 4.16. Mean scores of girls and boys on pupil questionnaire items which revealed significant gender differences among pupils in the 6th class cohorts in either 1997 or 2000.

	1997 cohort			**2000 cohort**		
	Girls' Mean (*SD*)	**Boys' Mean (*SD*)**	***p***	**Girls' Mean (*SD*)**	**Boys' Mean (*SD*)**	***p***
How much do you like school? (1=like a lot, 4 = dislike a lot)	**2.16 (0.75)**	**2.49 (0.82)**	***p*<.0001**	**1.96 (0.52)**	**2.49 (0.87)**	***p*<.0001**
How far would you like to go in school? (1= finish primary, 4= go to college / university)	**3.62 (0.68)**	**3.40 (0.74)**	***p*<.005**	**3.81 (0.44)**	**3.55 (0.78)**	***p*<.0001**
How far do you think you will actually go in school? (1=finish primary, 4=go to college / university)	**3.44 (0.66)**	**3.28 (0.68)**	***p*<.05**	**3.62 (0.54)**	**3.34 (0.67)**	***p*<.0001**
It's important to me to do well at school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	1.34 (0.53)	1.41 (0.60)	*ns*	**1.25 (0.46)**	**1.38 (0.61)**	***p*<.05**
To do well in school you need to do lots of hard work and study at home (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**1.59 (0.70)**	**1.77 (0.86)**	***p*<.05**	1.62 (0.75)	1.69 (0.84)	*ns*
I'm not as nice looking as most people (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**2.34 (0.79)**	**2.70 (0.87)**	***p*<.0001**	**2.53 (0.82)**	**2.79 (0.77)**	***p*<.0001**
I think I'm good at sports (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**1.71 (0.74)**	**1.39 (0.61)**	***p*<.0001**	2.09 (0.96)	1.92 (1.31)	*ns*
I often feel lonely at school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**3.18 (0.91)**	**3.39 (0.81)**	***p*<.05**	**3.13 (0.94)**	**3.33 (0.89)**	***p*<.05**
No one pays much attention to me at home (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**3.43 (0.75)**	**3.24 (0.81)**	***p*<.05**	3.42 (0.72)	3.28 (0.81)	*ns*
I'm popular with my classmates (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**2.20 (0.84)**	**2.02 (0.71)**	***p*<.05**	2.08 (0.75)	1.96 (0.73)	*ns*

Boys' and girls' ratings of their own relative success or weakness in various curricular areas in 2000 and 1997 varied to some extent. As shown in Table 4.17, girls rated themselves more favourably than did boys in Irish Writing and English reading in 2000, whereas in 1997 boys' and girls' evaluations of themselves in these subject areas did not differ significantly.

Conversely, boys' self-ratings in the areas of History and Geography in 1997 were more positive than those of girls, while in 2000 no gender differences were evident. Similarly, girls had a more positive perception of their skills in English writing than boys in 1997, whereas in 2000 this was not the case. Finally, gender differences in 2000 in pupils' ratings of their skills in Irish reading, Music, and Sport (each except Sport favouring girls) were similar to those found in 1997.

Table 4.17. Mean scores of girls and boys on pupil questionnaire items relating to self-evaluation relative to others in various subjects which revealed significant gender differences among 6th class pupils in either 1997 or 2000.

	1997 cohort			**2000 cohort**		
	Girls' Mean (*SD*)	**Boys' Mean (*SD*)**	***Diff***	**Girls' Mean (*SD*)**	**Boys' Mean (*SD*)**	***Diff***
Mathematics (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.92 (0.58)**	**1.74 (0.64)**	***p*<.005**	1.89 (0.54)	1.81 (0.62)	*ns*
Irish Reading (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.81 (0.65)**	**1.95 (0.70)**	***p*<.05**	**1.84 (0.86)**	**2.02 (0.71)**	***p*<.05**
Irish Writing (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	1.90 (0.64)	2.01 (0.66)	*ns*	**1.79 (0.82)**	**2.16 (0.79)**	***p*<.0001**
English Reading (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	1.43 (0.56)	1.48 (0.59)	*ns*	**1.42 (0.52)**	**1.56 (0.61)**	***p*<.05**
English Writing (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.45 (0.55)**	**1.58 (0.60)**	***p*<.05**	1.56 (0.56)	1.63 (0.59)	*ns*
History (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.99 (0.65)**	**1.87 (0.62)**	***p*<.05**	1.86 (0.58)	1.82 (0.71)	*ns*
Geography (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.88 (0.64)**	**1.69 (0.67)**	***p*<.005**	1.77 (0.78)	1.72 (0.63)	*ns*
Arts and Crafts (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	1.77 (0.68)	1.76 (0.71)	*ns*	**1.69 (0.62)**	**1.87 (0.72)**	***p*<.05**
Music (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.76 (0.76)**	**2.12 (0.80)**	***p*<.0001**	**1.62 (0.72)**	**2.25 (0.82)**	***p*<.0001**
Sport (1= near the top, 3= near the bottom)	**1.71 (0.74)**	**1.39 (0.61)**	***p*<.0001**	**1.74 (0.71)**	**1.41 (0.61)**	***p*<.0001**

One possible effect of participation in the scheme would be an improvement in pupils' attitudes towards school. In sections 4.2 to 4.7 of this chapter, differences between pupils' attitudes in 1997 and 2000 were described. However, overall differences may mask gender differences. For this reason, *t*-tests were performed between the responses of girls in 1997 and 2000, and between the responses of boys in 1997 and 2000, on each individual questionnaire item. Items on which girls in the 1997 and 2000 cohorts differed significantly are presented in Table 4.18. It appears that girls' attitudes to a variety of school-related issues changed (and in most cases became more positive) during this period. Responses indicate that girls in 6th class in 2000 liked school better, wanted to remain in education longer, and expected to remain in education longer than did girls in 1997. Girls in 2000 also indicated a higher level of pride in their school work and were more likely to agree that they were doing well at school. Finally, girls' evaluations of their performance in four curricular areas, namely History, Geography, Science / Nature studies and Music, increased between 1997 and 2000.

Table 4.18. Mean scores of girls on pupil questionnaire items and results of independent *t*-tests which revealed significant gender differences among girls in the 6th class cohorts of 1997 and 2000.

Questionnaire Item	**Girls 1997**		**Girls 2000**		Girls 1997 vs girls 2000
	Mean	***SD***	**Mean**	***SD***	***p***
How much do you like school (1=like a lot, 4=dislike a lot)	2.16	0.75	2.00	0.58	$p<.05$
How far would you like to go in school (1= finish primary, 4= go to college / university)	3.62	0.68	3.82	0.44	$p<.002$
How far do you think you will actually go in school (1=finish primary, 4=go to college / university)	3.44	0.66	3.61	0.56	$p<.01$
I'm proud of my school work (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	2.12	0.60	1.96	0.57	$p<.01$
I liked to be asked questions in class (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	2.38	0.84	2.22	0.73	$p<.05$
I feel I'm doing well in school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	2.01	0.53	1.87	0.64	$p<.05$
To do well in school you need to be very lucky (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	3.41	0.77	3.25	0.81	$p<.05$
I'm not as nice looking as most people (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	2.34	0.79	2.5	0.82	$p<.05$
History (1= near the top, 2=around the middle, 3= near the bottom)	2.00	0.65	1.85	0.58	$p<.05$
Geography (1= near the top, 2=around the middle, 3= near the bottom)	1.88	0.64	1.73	0.62	$p<.05$
Science / Nature Studies(1= near the top, 2=around the middle, 3= near the bottom)	1.92	0.66	1.76	0.60	$p<.05$
Music (1= near the top, 2=around the middle, 3= near the bottom)	1.76	0.76	1.61	0.71	$p<.05$

Overall, the school-related attitudes of boys in the 1997 and 2000 cohorts did not differ (Table 4.19). In fact, there was only one item – on thinking themselves good at Sport - on which there was a significant difference between boys in the 1997 and 2000 cohorts.

Table 4.19. Mean scores of boys on pupil questionnaire item and results of independent *t*-tests which revealed a significant gender differences between boys in the 6th class cohorts in 1997 and 2000.

Questionnaire Item	Boys 1997		Boys 2000		Boys 1997 vs boys 2000
	Mean	***SD***	**Mean**	***SD***	***p***
I think I'm good at sports (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	1.59	0.74	1.76	0.80	$p<.05$

4.9. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PUPILS' ACHIEVEMENTS AND ATTITUDES.

In this section, the focus is on the relationship between the performance of pupils in reading and Mathematics in 2000 and a variety of pupil variables. Results of exploratory analyses aimed at discovering whether achievement is related to pupils' attitudes to school and schoolwork, scholastic self-concept, self-esteem and vocational aspirations are reported.

4.9.1. The relationship between achievement and pupils' educational aspirations, expectations and liking for school.

Correlations between pupils' responses to questionnaire items designed to measure attitudes to school and their total reading and Mathematics scores were calculated. Analyses revealed that pupils' educational aspirations and expectations are significantly correlated with their reading and Mathematics scores. As shown in Table 4.20, higher reading and Mathematics scores are associated both with pupils wishing to remain in full-time education longer, and expecting to stay in education longer.

Table 4.20. Correlations between 6th class pupils' responses to questionnaire items relating to liking for school and educational aspirations and expectations, and their total reading and Mathematics scores in 2000.

Questionnaire Item	Total Reading score (*r*)	Total Mathematics score (*r*)
How much do you like school? (1=dislike a lot, 4=like a lot)	**.19*** **	**.19*** **
How far would you like to go in school? (1=finish primary school, 4=go to college or university)	**.21*** **	**.21*** **
How far do you think you will actually go in school? (1=finish primary school, 4=go to college or university)	**.32*** **	**.28*** **

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

It is not surprising that there was an association between pupils' reported liking for school and their reading and Mathematics scores, as one might expect pupils who are good at schoolwork to like school more than those who perform poorly. The present finding is consistent with the findings of the National Assessment of English reading in 5th class (Cosgrove et al., 2000), where small, but statistically significant, positive correlations were found between total reading score, liking for school, and educational expectations and aspirations (Table 4.21).

Table 4.21. Correlations between pupils' liking for school, preferred and expected levels of attainment[1], and total reading score, in the 1998 National Assessment of English reading.

	Liking for school	**Educational aspirations**	**Educational expectations**
Total reading score	r=.15 (p<.001)	r=.10 (p<.05)	r=.15 (p<.001)

[1]The item on pupils' liking for school was identical in both the 1998 Assessment and the evaluation of *Breaking the Cycle*. However, while in the 1998 National Assessment, the option "don't know" was included in the items on pupils' educational aspirations and expectations, it was not included in the pupil questionnaire used in the evaluation of *Breaking the Cycle.*

An alternative means of examining the relationship between pupils' attitudes to school and their achievement is to describe the average total reading and Mathematics scores of pupils grouped according to each response category. The mean Mathematics and reading scores of pupils grouped in this way for items 1-3 are presented in Table 4.22.

As the data show, it is indeed the case that pupils who indicated that they liked school "a lot" had slightly higher mean reading and Mathematics scores than pupils who agreed that they just liked school, disliked it or disliked it "a lot". Pupils who indicated that they would like to attend college or university achieved higher scores on the reading and Mathematics tests than pupils who indicated that they would like to leave school after completing the Leaving Certificate. The relationship between pupils' responses to this item and their achievements are quite linear in nature, with the exception of the small number of pupils who indicated that they wished to cease education following primary school. Similarly, pupils who expected to complete the Leaving Certificate, or to attend college or university, had higher reading and Mathematics scores than pupils who anticipated that they would finish their formal education after completing the Junior Certificate.

Table 4.22. Mean reading and Mathematics scores of 6th class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 2000 according to reported levels of liking school, and according to pupils' reports of how far they would like to go in school and how far they think they will actually go in school.

How much do you like school?				
	Like a lot (11.8%)	Like (64.0%)	Dislike (15.7%)	Dislike a lot (8.4%)
Reading score	41.0	40.8	37.0	31.5
Mathematics score	55.5	55.3	48.4	44.8
How far would you like to go in school?				
	Finish Primary school (1.4%)	Do the Junior Certificate (2.8%)	Do the Leaving Certificate (22.6%)	Go to College / University (73%)
Reading score	33.8	28.2	34.4	41.6
Mathematics score	48.0	39.1	45.5	56.3
How far do you think you will actually go in school?				
	Finish Primary school (0.3%)	Do the Junior Certificate (5.9%)	Do the Leaving Certificate (38.5%)	Go to College/ University (55.3%)
Reading score	34.0	27.4	36.2	43.1
Mathematics score	49.0	37.7	50.1	57.1

4.9.2. The relationship between achievement and pupils' attitudes to schoolwork.

Responses to items relating to attitudes to school and schoolwork suggest that pupils who had felt they were doing well in school, and who placed some importance on their academic success, had relatively high achievement scores. Pupils who disagreed, or strongly disagreed, with the statement "I feel I'm doing well in school" had relatively low reading and Mathematics scores, while pupils who disagreed that they liked to be asked questions in class had relatively low reading scores. Surprisingly, the extent to which pupils agreed that they were proud of their schoolwork was unrelated to reading or Mathematics achievement (Table 4.23). However, a high correlation would have been difficult to obtain because so many pupils in the cohort (almost 90%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were proud of their schoolwork.

Analysis of responses to items related to attributions for success in school reveals that pupils who disagreed that success at school depended on "luck" had higher scores on both reading and Mathematics tests. In other words, pupils who believed that success at school was due to factors beyond their control had poorer reading and Mathematics skills. However, surprisingly, there was no relationship between achievement in either subject area and attributing success at school to doing "lots of hard work and study at home".

Table 4.23. Correlations between 6th class pupils' responses to questionnaire items relating to attitudes to schoolwork and their total reading and Mathematics scores in 2000.

Questionnaire Item	Total Reading score (*r*)	Total Mathematics score (*r*)
I am proud of my schoolwork (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	-.09	-.08
I like to be asked questions in class (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**-.19*** **	**-.13***
I feel I'm doing well in school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**-.23*** **	**-.17****
It is important to me to do well in school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	-.01	**-.11***
To do well in school you need to be smart (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	.00	.03
To do well in school you need to be lucky (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**.18*** **	**.17****
To do well in school you need to do lots of hard work and study at home (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	.10	.03

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

4.9.3. The relationship between achievement and pupils' perceptions of their performance at school.

Pupils were asked to rate (from "near the top" to "near the bottom") their scholastic performance relative to other members of their class in a variety of subject areas. The correlations between these self-evaluations and achievements in reading and Mathematics are shown in Table 4.24. Pupils' positive self-evaluations of their performance in Mathematics, Irish reading, Irish writing, English reading, History, and Geography were associated with higher Mathematics and reading scores. Therefore, achievement in reading and Mathematics was associated with positive self-evaluations across a range of curriculum areas. In contrast, there was no association between pupils' self-ratings in Art and Craft and reading and Mathematics scores. Positive self-evaluations in Sport were associated with lower reading scores, while positive self-evaluations in Music were associated with higher Mathematics, but not English, scores. The highest correlation in the set was between pupils' self-evaluations in Mathematics and total Mathematics score (r= -.46), while the second highest was between pupils' evaluations in English reading and English reading score (r= -.29).

Table 4.24. Correlations between the self-evaluations of 6th class pupils in 2000 in various types of school work and their total reading and Mathematics scores.

Questionnaire Item	Total reading score *(r)*	Total Mathematics score *(r)*
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Mathematics (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.29*** **	**-.46*** **
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Irish Reading (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.23*** **	**-.22*** **
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Irish Writing (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.13***	**-.18****
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at English reading (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.29*** **	**-.18****
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at English writing (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.14****	-.02
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at History (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.27*** **	**-.11***
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Geography (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.15****	**-.14***
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Science / nature studies (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	-.10	**-.14***
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Art and Craft (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	.01	.10
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Music (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	-.05	**-.13***
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Sport (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**.15***	.07

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

The mean English reading and Mathematics scores of pupils grouped according to their perceived competence in various aspects of school work are presented in Table 4.25. Those who rated themselves as near the top of their class in English reading had higher reading scores than pupils who rated themselves as around the middle of the class, who in turn had higher reading scores than pupils who rated themselves as near the bottom of their class. A similar relationship was found between pupils' self-ratings of their Mathematics standing and their Mathematics achievement scores. However, the sample of pupils who perceived themselves as being near the bottom of their class in both subjects is small.

Table 4.25. Mean reading and Mathematics scores of pupils who think they are *near the top, around the middle* and *near the bottom* in English reading and Mathematics relative to others in their class.

Subject Area	Response option		
Reading score	*Near the top* at English Reading	*Around the middle* at English Reading	*Near the bottom* at English Reading
	43.3 (*n*=185)	35.3 (*n*=142)	33.4 (*n*=12)
Mathematics score	*Near the top* at Mathematics	*Around the middle* at Mathematics	*Near the bottom* at Mathematics
	65.0 (*n*=86)	51.3 (*n*=217)	38.0 (*n*=37)

4.9.4. The relationship between achievement and pupils' self-concept, self-esteem, relationship with parents and home atmosphere.

The final section of the questionnaire asked pupils for their views of themselves and their relationship with their parents. There appears to be no relationship between variables designed to assess these factors and achievement test scores, with the exception of pupils thinking themselves to be good at sport, in which case agreement is associated with lower reading scores. Achievement was not associated with pupils' perceptions of their popularity with peers, loneliness at school, and home atmosphere (Table 4.26).

Table 4.26. Correlations between responses to questionnaire items related to self-concept, self-esteem, and home atmosphere and total reading and Mathematics scores of 6th class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 2000.

Questionnaire Item	Total reading score (*r*)	Total Mathematics score (*r*)
I'm a lot of fun to be with (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	.06	.10
I'm not as nice looking as most people (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	.05	.01
I think I'm good at sports (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**.13***	.07
I often feel lonely at school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	-.01	.03
My parents and I have a lot of fun together (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	.06	.00
No one pays much attention to me at home (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	-.03	-.04
I'm popular with my classmates (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	.01	.01

*$p<.05$

4.9.5. The relationship between pupils' occupational preferences and their achievement levels.

In an open-ended item at the end of the questionnaire, pupils were asked to specify the type of job they would like to do when they grew up. These responses were then coded into occupational categories. Table 4.27 presents the mean reading and Mathematics scores of pupils choosing jobs in a variety of occupational sectors. The fact that some occupational categories have very small numbers of pupils makes comparisons of achievement based on these groups difficult, but it is possible to compare the reading and Mathematics performance of the larger groups. Among the six most popular occupational categories (i.e., the occupational preference groups that contain 15 or more pupils), the highest-scoring group in both reading and Mathematics was "Technology", followed by "Professional", and "unrealistic / fantasy" . Conversely, pupils wishing to take up jobs considered female-typed "trades" had the lowest reading scores, followed by those opting for "law enforcement" and male-typed "trades". Mean Mathematics achievement was lowest among pupils opting for "law enforcement", female-typed "trades", and male-typed "trades".

Table 4.27. Mean reading and Mathematics scores of 6th class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 2000 choosing jobs in various occupational categories[1].

Category of job	**Mean reading score**	**Mean mathematics score**
Animal orientated jobs (e.g., farmer or trainer)	52.1 (*n*=7)	51.2 (*n*=6)
Artistic / creative (e.g., fashion designer)	48.8 (*n*=10)	56.2 (*n*=10)
Agricultural / outdoor work	45.5 (*n*=2)	61.0 (*n*=2)
Technology (e.g., computer programmer)	44.4 (*n*=16)	64.7 (*n*=16)
Professional (e.g., lawyer, teacher, doctor)	43.3 (*n*=134)	57.4 (*n*=134)
Services (e.g., sales assistant)	35.0 (*n*=3)	38.7 (*n*=3)
Professional childcare/ carer (e.g., work in a crèche)	34.7 (*n*=9)	50.0 (*n*=9)
Unrealistic / fantasy (e.g., pop-star, stunt man, footballer)	34.6 (*n*=54)	51.5 (*n*=54)
Male-typed trades (e.g., builder, electrician or mechanic)	34.5 (*n*=40)	47.4 (*n*=42)
Law enforcement / armed forces (e.g., guard or in the army)	33.1 (*n*=16)	43.1 (*n*=16)
Female typed trades (e.g., beautician)	32.4 (*n*=18)	44.9 (*n*=18)
Don't know	28.9 (*n*=7)	44.3 (*n*=7)
Miscellaneous (including unspecific e.g., well paid job)	41.1 (*n*=17)	57.9 (*n*=16)

[1] Scores are presented in descending order of the mean reading score of each occupational group.

4.9.6. A comparison of the relationship between the achievements and attitudes of pupils in the 1997 and 2000 cohorts.

There are more resemblances than differences in the relationships between the attitudes and achievements of pupils in the 1997 and 2000 cohorts. However, correlations between achievement and pupils' educational aspirations and expectations in 2000 are lower than those in 1997 in the case of both reading and Mathematics achievement (Table 4.28). Furthermore, there is a positive relationship between pupils' liking for school and their reading and Mathematics achievements in 2000, whereas this was not the case in 1997.

Table 4.28. Correlations between 6th class pupils' liking for school, their educational aspirations and expectations, and total reading and Mathematics scores in 1997 and 2000.

Questionnaire item	1997 cohort		2000 cohort	
	Total reading score (*r*)	**Total Mathematics score (*r*)**	**Total reading score (*r*)**	**Total Mathematics score (*r*)**
How much do you like school? (1=dislike a lot, 4=like a lot)	.02	.06	**.19*** **	**.19*** **
How far would you like to go in school? (1=finish primary school, 4=go to college or university)	**.37*** **	**.31*** **	**.21*** **	**.21*** **
How far do you think you will actually go in school? (1=finish primary school, 4=go to college or university)	**.42*** **	**.37** **	**.32*** **	**.28*** **

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

A comparison of the relationship between pupils' reading and Mathematics scores and their attitudes to schoolwork in 1997 and 2000 (Table 4.29) reveals a good deal of consistency in the nature of the relationships in both years. An exception is the item on pride in schoolwork, which was significantly associated with performance in Mathematics in 1997, but was not related to performance in either subject area in 2000. Attributing success at school to being smart was associated with lower reading and Mathematics scores in 1997 but not in 2000. There appears to be a fairly robust positive relationship between pupils thinking they are doing well at school and their actual achievements, while pupils in both the 1997 and 2000 cohorts who thought that luck was necessary to do well in school tended to have lower achievements. As was the case in 1997, there was no significant association in 2000 between thinking that success at school depended on doing lots of hard work and study at home and achievement in either reading or Mathematics.

Table 4.29. Correlations between 6th class pupils' responses to questionnaire items relating to attitudes to schoolwork and their total reading and Mathematics scores in 1997 and 2000.

	1997 cohort		2000 cohort	
Questionnaire Item	Total reading score (*r*)	Total Mathematics score (*r*)	Total reading score (*r*)	Total Mathematics score (*r*)
I am proud of my schoolwork (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	-.09	**-.15****	-.09	-.08
I like to be asked questions in class (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**-.11***	**-.11***	**-.19*****	**-.13***
I feel I'm doing well in school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**-.20****	**-.26****	**-.23*****	**-.17****
It is important to me to do well in school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	-.01	-.02	-.01	**-.11***
To do well in school you need to be smart (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**.12***	**.14***	.00	.03
To do well in school you need to be lucky (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**.22****	**.30****	**.18*****	**.17****
To do well in school you need to do lots of hard work and study at home (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	-.08	-.08	.10	.03

**p*<.05; ***p*<.01; ****p*<.001

The self-evaluations of pupils in a variety of subject areas, and their association with performance in reading and Mathematics in 1997 and 2000, are shown in Table 4.30. In both cohorts, higher reading and Mathematics achievement tends to be associated with better self-evaluations in most subject areas. The highest correlation in both years was between pupils' self-evaluations in Mathematics and their total Mathematics score. In both cohorts, there was no relationship between pupils' self-ratings in Art and Craft and test scores in either area, while among both cohorts, positive self-evaluation in Sport was associated with lower achievement in reading. Finally, pupils' self-evaluations in Music was not related to their reading achievements in either 1997 or 2000. However, while self-evaluation in Music was unrelated to achievement in Mathematics in 1997, the relationship was positive in 2000.

Table 4.30. Correlations between the self-evaluations of 6th class pupils in various types of school work and their total reading and Mathematics scores in 1997 and 2000.

	1997 cohort		2000 cohort	
Questionnaire Item	Total reading score *(r)*	Total Mathematics score *(r)*	Total reading score *(r)*	Total Mathematics score *(r)*
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Maths (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.26*** **	**-.50*** **	**-.29*** **	**-.46*** **
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Irish Reading (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.20*** **	**-.17*** **	**-.23*** **	**-.22*** **
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Irish Writing (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.16*** **	**-.19*** **	**-.13***	**-.18****
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at English reading (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.28*** **	**-.16*** **	**-.29*** **	**-.18****
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at English writing (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.14*** **	-.09	**-.14****	-.02
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at History (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.27*** **	**-.22*** **	**-.27*** **	**-.11***
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Geography (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.21*** **	**-.19*** **	**-.15****	**-.14***
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Science / nature studies (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**-.12***	-.08	-.10	**-.14***
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Art and Craft (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	.00	-.03	.01	.10
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Music (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	-.05	-.04	-.05	**-.13***
Pupils' perception of their standing in the class at Sport (1=near the top, 3=near the bottom)	**.18*** **	-.07	**.15***	.07

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Correlations between reading and Mathematics achievement and pupils' responses to items designed to assess their self-concepts, self-esteem, relationship with parents and home atmosphere in 1997 and 2000 are presented in Table 4.31. Only a few are significant. In fact in 2000, only one item (related to pupils thinking themselves good at Sport) was related to achievement. This was also the case for the 1997 cohort, in which pupils who thought they were good at Sport had lower reading achievements. However, in 1997, pupils who reported feeling lonely at school tended to have lower achievements in both reading and Mathematics. This was not found for the 2000 cohort.

It should be noted that – as is the case with all correlational analysis – it is not possible to determine the direction of the relationships which have been expressed as correlations throughout this section. For example, while it is possible that poor achievement is a consequence of feeling lonely at school, it is equally possible that poor scholastic performance manifests itself in feelings of alienation and loneliness in a variety of situations.

Table 4.31. Correlations between responses to questionnaire items related to self-concept, self-esteem, and home atmosphere and total reading and Mathematics scores of 6th class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1997 and 2000.

	1997 cohort		2000 cohort	
Questionnaire Item	Total reading score (*r*)	Total Mathematics score (*r*)	Total reading score (*r*)	Total Mathematics score (*r*)
I'm a lot of fun to be with (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	-.05	-.05	.06	.10
I'm not as nice looking as most people (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	-.02	.02	.05	.01
I think I'm good at sports (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**.16****	.06	**.13***	.07
I often feel lonely at school (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**.17*****	**.16****	-.01	.03
My parents and I have a lot of fun together (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	.01	-.02	.06	.00
No one pays much attention to me at home (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	**.11***	.05	-.03	-.04
I'm popular with my classmates (1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)	-.02	-.04	.01	.01

**p*<.05; ***p*<.01; ****p*<.001

Data on the preferred occupations (coded into categories) of pupils in both cohorts and their mean reading and Mathematics achievements are presented in Table 4.32. Only categories chosen by more than 15 pupils in both 1997 and 2000 are highlighted. Across the two years for which data are available, only five occupational categories contain a minimum of 15 pupils in each category. Reading and Mathematics achievement follow a pattern of decreasing scores among the following groups: "professional", "unrealistic / fantasy", "law enforcement", male-typed "trades", female-typed "trades". Thus, pupils opting for professional jobs achieved at higher levels than did those opting for female- or male-typed "trades". Therefore, although the small numbers limit the comparisons that can be made, there seems to be some relationship between career choice and achievement, with pupils who opted for professional careers achieving higher mean scores than those choosing jobs in other popular categories.

Table 4.32. Mean reading and Mathematics scores of 6th class pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools choosing jobs in various occupational categories[1] in 1997 and 2000.

	1997 cohort		2000 cohort	
Category of job	**Mean reading score**	**Mean mathematics score**	**Mean reading score**	**Mean mathematics score**
Animal oriented jobs (e.g., farmer or trainer)	34.9 (*n*=8)	50.9 (*n*=7)	52.1 (*n*=7)	51.2 (*n*=6)
Artistic / creative (e.g., fashion designer)	44.6 (*n*=17)	59.0 (*n*=14)	48.8 (*n*=10)	56.2 (*n*=10)
Agricultural / outdoor work	31.1 (*n*=11)	49.7 (*n*=11)	45.5 (*n*=2)	61.0 (*n*=2)
Technology (e.g., computer programmer)	50.5 (*n*=8)	73.3 (*n*=7)	44.4 (*n*=16)	64.7 (*n*=16)
Professional (e.g., lawyer, teacher, doctor)	**41.6 (*n*=118)**	**59.9 (*n*=110)**	**43.3 (*n*=134)**	**57.4 (*n*=134)**
Services (e.g., sales assistant)	36.4 (*n*=23)	49.5 (*n*=21)	35.0 (*n*=3)	38.7 (*n*=3)
Professional childcare/ carer (e.g., work in a crèche)	32.6 (*n*=13)	46.7 (*n*=12)	34.7 (*n*=9)	50.0 (*n*=9)
Unrealistic / fantasy (e.g., pop-star, stunt man, footballer)	**42.3 (*n*=62)**	**60.9 (*n*=61)**	**34.6 (*n*=54)**	**51.5 (*n*=54)**
Male-typed trades (e.g., builder, electrician or mechanic)	**34.3 (*n*=48)**	**48.9 (*n*=46)**	**34.5 (*n*=40)**	**47.4 (*n*=42)**
Law enforcement / armed forces (e.g., guard or in the army)	**39.9 (*n*=21)**	**56.3 (*n*=20)**	**33.1 (*n*=16)**	**43.1 (*n*=16)**
Female-typed trades (e.g., beautician)	**36.6 (*n*=27)**	**45.4 (*n*=25)**	**32.4 (*n*=18)**	**44.9 (*n*=18)**
Don't know	47.3 (*n*=10)	63.8 (*n*=10)	28.9 (*n*=7)	44.3 (*n*=7)

[1] Scores are presented in descending order of the mean reading score of each occupational group in the 2000 cohort.

It is noteworthy that the highest-scoring group in 1997 was composed of pupils who indicated that they wished to work in the area of technology (*n*=8). These pupils greatly out-performed pupils in the standardisation sample in both reading (mean scores of 50.5 vs 40.4 respectively) and Mathematics (73.3 vs 58.7). In 2000, those who chose a career in technology also had the highest mean Mathematics score of any of the occupational groups (*Mean*=64.7). The highest mean score in reading was achieved by pupils choosing animal-oriented work (*n*=7), and their score (52.1) also exceeded that of 40.4 achieved by pupils in the standardisation sample.

4.10. CONCLUSION

Pupils in 6th class in *Breaking the Cycle* schools generally demonstrated a positive attitude towards school. In 2000, a majority indicated that they liked school and more than two-thirds wished to stay in full-time education until third level. There is, however, quite a large discrepancy between the

percentage of pupils who said they would *like* to go to college or university (72.8%) and the percentage who thought they would *actually* go (54.7%). This discrepancy has also been found among other samples of pupils (e.g., Cosgrove et al. 2000), but it is of a greater magnitude in *Breaking the Cycle* schools.

Most pupils also had very positive attitudes towards schoolwork: 9 out of 10 were proud of their schoolwork and felt they were doing well at school, while virtually all thought it important to do well at school.

When pupils were asked to rate their own performance relative to others in their class, it is noteworthy that more than half of all pupils considered themselves to be near the top of their class at English. It was in the subject areas of Music and Irish that pupils' evaluations of their performance were least positive. There was a good consensus among pupils that success at school depended on study and hard work, rather than on natural ability or luck. It could be inferred from this that pupils had fairly realistic views about the determinants of success at school. However, there was an increase between 1997 and 2000 in the percentage of pupils that strongly agreed that success at school depends on being smart (10.2% in 1997 vs 17.2% in 2000) and a corresponding decrease in the percentage strongly disagreeing that success depends on luck (51.7% in 1997 vs 43.3% in 2000). This suggests that pupils in the 2000 cohort were more fatalistic in their attributions for scholastic success than their counterparts in 1997. The responses of pupils in the 1997 and 2000 cohorts, when compared across all questionnaire items, were found to be broadly similar. However, a greater percentage of pupils in 2000 than in 1997 strongly agreed that they were doing well at school.

Not only were positive attitudes towards school prevalent among pupils in 2000, but most had positive views of themselves, and of their relationships with peers and parents. There is, however, a small but significant minority of pupils for whom the experience of school was less positive. A small percentage indicated that they did not wish to continue in school past primary school (1.3%) or past Junior Certificate (3.7%), while almost one in ten claimed to dislike school 'a lot'. Further, about one pupil in five felt he/she was not popular with classmates, and about the same proportion reported often feeling lonely at school.

Gender differences among pupils were observed in the case of 12 of the 29 questionnaire items in 2000, with six of these differences arising in boys' and girls' self-ratings in a variety of subject areas. The self-evaluations of girls were more positive than those of boys in Irish reading, Irish writing, English reading, Arts and Craft, and Music, while boys' self-evaluations were more positive than those of girls in Sport. In terms of their general attitude to school, girls were more positive towards school than boys. While slightly less than one in 10 pupils overall claimed to dislike school "a lot", this attitude was much more common among boys (16.8%) than among girls (1.1%). The educational aspirations of girls (i.e., how long they wished to remain in full-time education) also exceeded those of boys, as did their educational expectations (i.e., the length of time they thought they would *actually* remain in education). These observations are consistent with those of an earlier Irish

study of the scholastic self-concepts of 6th class pupils (Kellaghan & Fontes, 1988) which revealed the self-ratings of girls on motivational and attitudinal characteristics to be higher than those of boys, and are also in line with data gathered from 5th class pupils as part of the National Assessment of Reading in 1998 (Cosgrove et al., 2000). A comparison of the attitudes of boys and girls in the 1997 and 2000 cohorts reveals more change in the attitudes of girls than of boys. For example, in the 2000 cohort, girls liked school better, wanted to remain in education longer, and expected to remain in education longer than did girls in 1997. Girls in 2000 also evaluated their schoolwork more positively, indicated a higher level of pride in their school work, and were more likely to agree that they were doing well at school than their counterparts in 1997. In contrast, there were virtually no differences between the attitudes of boys in the 1997 and 2000 cohorts.

Analysis of the relationship between pupils' attitudes and their achievements yielded some interesting findings. Higher scores in reading and Mathematics were associated with positive attitudes towards schooling, and pupils who liked school more, aspired to stay in the education system longer and expected to stay in education longer tended to do better in both subjects. Pupils who demonstrated positive feelings towards schoolwork (i.e., welcomed questions in class, felt that they were doing well at school, and disagreed that scholastic success depends on luck) tended to achieve higher scores. Surprisingly – and unlike in 1997 – the correlation in 2000 between pride in schoolwork and achievement in either reading or Mathematics was not significant, probably due to a lack of variance in the pride in schoolwork variable.

Pupils who perceived themselves to be near the top of their class in reading and Mathematics tended to achieve higher scores in both curriculum areas. In fact, high self-ratings in most subject areas were positively related to reading and Mathematics achievement. However, positive self-evaluations in Arts and Craft were not associated with scores in either reading and Mathematics, while positive self-evaluations in Sport were associated with poorer reading scores.

Achievement did not relate well to more general pupil variables, such as those concerning self-concepts and perceived atmosphere in the pupil's home. Finally, pupils who aspired to occupations which were categorised as "professional" achieved higher mean Mathematics and reading scores than did those choosing various "trades" or "unrealistic / fantasy" type jobs as their occupation of preference.

5. THE IMPACT OF THE SCHEME ON SCHOOLS

Since the inception of the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme in 1996, School Questionnaires have been distributed annually to principals in participating rural schools. The response rate in each year was very high: 99.2% in 1997, 97.6% in 1998, 95.1% in 1999, 94.3% in 2000, and 98.3% in 2001.

Although items in the questionnaire were designed to elicit information about a wide range of areas of school life, the sheer abundance of information collected over the four years rendered a detailed analysis of every questionnaire item from each year impractical. Thus, only a selection of data from the School Questionnaires is examined in this report[1]. Of particular interest, from the viewpoint of the final evaluation, were items regarding school personnel and resources, enrolment and attendance, rates of psychological assessment among pupils, discipline, the strength of links between home and school, and principals' views of the impact of the scheme. Particular emphasis was placed on the results of the 1996/97 School Questionnaire, which detailed what schools were like at the outset of the scheme, and the 2000/2001 School Questionnaire, which described schools' characteristics towards the end of the 5-year pilot project. It was hoped that a comparison of the 1996/97 baseline data with the results from the subsequent questionnaires (and in particular the 2000/2001 School Questionnaire) would reveal whether the scheme had an impact on pupils and schools in important areas of school life.

The availability of teaching personnel and schools' access to various facilities and items of equipment are examined in Section 5.1. Enrolment and attendance levels are described in Section 5.2, while discipline and psychological assessment rates, and pupil retention rates are examined in Section 5.3. Section 5.4 looks at the strength of home–school links, and, finally, principals' opinions and perceptions of *Breaking the Cycle* are described in Section 5.5.

5.1. SCHOOL PERSONNEL & RESOURCES

Both the 1996/97 and 2000/2001 School Questionnaires required principals to provide information about the number and types of teaching personnel working in *Breaking the Cycle* schools. Information on the more "physical" attributes of the school, for example the facilities and equipment available, was also collected.

[1] Data from the 1996/97 School Questionnaire were presented in the report *The Breaking the Cycle Scheme in Rural Schools: A Report for 1996-1997* (Eivers & Weir, 1998). Similarly, principals' responses in 1997, 1998, and 1999 were examined in the *Interim Report on the Evaluation of the Breaking the Cycle Scheme in Rural Schools* (Weir & Ryan, 2000).

5.1.1. Personnel

Principals were asked to identify all teaching personnel who had worked in the school for at least three months during the 1995/96 and 1999/2000 school years. During the 1995/96 school year, schools had a mean of 2.78 class teachers, while in 1999/2000 there was an average of 2.58 class teachers in each school (Table 5.1). Although there was no significant change in the number of class teachers in schools since the outset of the scheme, there was a significant increase (t=7.18; df=237; p<.001) in the mean number of remedial class teachers in 1999/2000 (0.49 in 1995/96 vs. 1.05 in 1999/2000). Although only half of schools had a remedial teacher available to them in 1995/96, 94% of schools reported having access to one in 1999/2000. There was also a significant increase (t=5.35; df=237; p<.001) in the mean number of dance, music, and speech and drama teachers working in schools in 1999/2000. Almost two-thirds of schools (64.1%) had access to such teachers in 1999/2000, compared to only 25.4% in 1995/96. Similarly, there was a significant increase (t=4.54; df=237; p<.001) in the mean number of Art & Craft, cookery and costume design teachers in 1999/2000. Finally, a quarter of schools in 1999/2000 reported having access to a P.E. teacher, and to other teachers, such as resource, special needs and foreign language teachers.

Table 5.1. Mean number of different types of teaching personnel working in schools participating in *Breaking the Cycle* in 1995/96 (N=122 schools) and in 1999/2000 (N=117 schools).

Type	**1995/96**		**1999/2000**	
	Mean number	% Have Access	Mean number	% Have Access
Class teachers	2.78	100%	2.58	98.2%*
Remedial	0.49	47.5%	1.05	94.0%
Special teacher for Travellers	-	-	-	-
Dance/ music/ speech & drama	0.42	25.4%	1.09	64.1%
Art & Craft / cookery / costume design	0.04	4.1%	0.29	23.9%
P.E.	**	**	0.30	25.6%
Other (e.g., resource, special needs teachers, foreign language teachers)	0.16	10.7%	0.34	26.5%

*Two principals in 2000/2001 did not report having any class teachers.
**Questionnaire items in 1996/97 were open-ended, while questionnaire items in 2000/2001 gave teachers a choice of teaching personnel. Thus, the absence of, for example P.E. teachers, may be due to differences in coding rather than an actual lack of teaching personnel.

Two additional items in the 2000/2001 School Questionnaire sought to assess the extent to which principals had difficulty in filling teaching posts and retaining teachers in their school. The data indicate that principals were experiencing some difficulty with staff shortages, as 44.9% of principals reported some, or great, difficulty in attracting teachers to take up posts in their school (Table 5.2). However, the vast majority of principals (85.4%) indicated that they had no difficulty in retaining teachers.

Table 5.2. Number and percentage of principals in 2000/2001 who indicated that they had great difficulty, some difficulty, or no difficulty, attracting teachers to take up posts, and retaining teachers, in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools.

Attracting teachers to take up posts (*N*=109)		
Great difficulty	Some difficulty	No difficulty
18 (16.5%)	31 (28.4%)	60 (55.1%)
Retaining teachers (*N*=103)		
Great difficulty	Some difficulty	No difficulty
4 (3.9%)	11 (10.7%)	88 (85.4%)

In a related item, principals were asked to give reasons for their difficulties in filling and maintaining teaching posts in their school (Table 5.3 and 5.4 respectively).

Table 5.3. Number and percentage of principals in 2000/2001 (*N*=48)* who put forward reasons for why it was difficult to attract teachers to take up posts in *Breaking the Cycle* schools.

Comment	**Number (%)****
Location of school / teachers do not want to teach in rural or Gaeltacht schools / difficulty finding accommodation in rural areas	20 41.7%
Shortage of teachers / shortage of qualified teachers	19 39.6%
School has a bad reputation / difficult school / disruptive pupil	2 4.2%
Poor condition of school / lack of facilities	3 6.3%
Other (e.g., no applications; older teachers tend not to change schools; enrolment decreasing)	14 29.2%

*7 principals (14.6%) noted again that they had no difficulty attracting teachers or that they have never had to fill any teaching posts.
**Percentages do not sum to 100% as principals were permitted to give more than one answer.

Table 5.4. Number and percentage of principals in 2000/2001 (*N*=19)* who put forward various reasons for why it was difficult to retain teachers in *Breaking the Cycle* schools.

Comment	**Number (%)****
Location of school / need car / isolated / accommodation difficult to find in rural areas	5 26.3%
Teachers not interested in teaching multiple classes	3 15.8%
Disruptive children / difficult school	2 10.5%
Other (e.g., poor building conditions; staff have retired; lack of permanency)	9 47.4%

*Two principals (10.5%) noted again that they had no difficulty retaining teachers.
**Percentages do not sum to 100% as principals were permitted to give more than one answer.

The location of the schools appears to have been the most significant barrier in the recruitment of teaching staff, as 41.7% of principals said that geographical isolation and problems finding accommodation in rural areas deterred teachers from applying for posts in their school. As one principal noted:

> Remedial, resource, BTC co-ordinators have taken jobs in more urban settings, rather than travel to small, scattered, ill-equipped schools like our own.

Over one-third of principals (39.6%) felt that the shortage of qualified teachers was a factor which made it difficult to recruit teachers, while a minority felt that the bad reputation of the school and poor school conditions contributed to their difficulties. For example, one principal wrote:

> Our school is an all boys school. It is classified as a tough school. Teachers find it far easier to teach the 'girls'…

Similarly, 26.3% of principals felt that the location of the school made it difficult to *retain* teachers, while 15.8% said that teachers did not want to teach multiple grade levels. Two principals (10.5%) felt that teaching in the school was difficult and pupils were disruptive which in turn increased their difficulties in retaining staff. According to one principal:

> The junior room teacher has up to 30 children in 4 classes to deal with- 4 remedial and 2 resource pupils included- a very daunting task.

Principals also provided a range of reasons which were classified as 'other'. For example:

> I have great difficulty in attracting and retaining a teacher in the post as teachers do not feel they have any guarantee of permanency as the [*Breaking the Cycle*] co-ordinator may decide to return to the classroom…

> Very few if any teachers reply to advertisements. We consider ourselves 'lucky' if <u>one</u> suitable/qualified teacher applies. This lack of choice is not good for a school.

Overall, the finding that almost half of principals were experiencing difficulties in attracting teaching staff is of some concern. In an attempt to examine the extent to which there was a lack of qualified primary school teachers nationally, the Joint Committee on Education and Science conducted a survey of primary schools throughout Ireland, met with key educational organisations, and held discussions with principals and teachers (Ireland, 2000). Their findings suggest that *Breaking the Cycle* principals were not alone in their struggle to fill teaching posts. For example, 85% of the 938 schools that replied to the Committee's survey said that they were having more difficulty recruiting qualified teachers than three years previously. It is worth noting that the Joint Committee on Education and Science made recommendations to enhance the supply of qualified teachers, for example, suggesting that the Department of Education ease the Irish language requirement so that qualified teachers from other countries could be appointed. Nonetheless, in addition to addressing teacher shortages, the findings suggest that more needs to be done to make the teaching posts in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools more appealing. It is likely that addressing some of the practical concerns raised by principals (e.g., providing incentives, financial or otherwise, to attract teachers to posts in these schools) would serve to increase the desirability of teaching in rural schools participating in the scheme.

As well as seeking information on teaching personnel, the 1996/97 and 2000/2001 School Questionnaires asked principals about their own teaching responsibilities. In both years, all but one principal reported having full-time teaching responsibilities. Principals were asked to indicate the number of hours per week that they spent on a variety of activities during a typical week. The results are presented in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5. Number of hours per week spent by principals (in single-teacher schools and in schools with two or more teachers) on tasks or activities in a typical week during the 1995/96 and 2000/2001 school years.

Activity	**1995/96**				**2000/2001**			
	Two- (or more) teacher school (*n*=105)		Single-teacher school (*n*=11)		Two- (or more) teacher school (*n*=104)		Single-teacher school (*n*=5)	
	Mean	Mode	Mean	Mode	Mean	Mode	Mean	Mode
School administrative tasks	4.2	2	2.3	90	4.5	5	2.8	1.5
Curriculum revision and/or planning	1.5	1	2.3	2	1.5	1	1.0	1
Monitoring teaching / learning in classrooms	0.7	0	0.3	0	0.6	0	0.3	0
Consulting with specialist teachers	0.4	0	0.1	0	1.0*	0.5	0.4*	0.5
Discussing educational objectives with teachers	0.8	0	0.1	0	1.0	1	0.5	0.5
Professional development activities	0.7	0	1.1	0	0.9	0	0.9	0
Teaching	21.7	25	23.3	20	21.4	25	22.5	20
Demonstrating lessons	0.5	0	0.7	0	0.5	0	0	0
Representing the school at meetings	0.9	0	0.7	0	0.7	0	0.5	0
Representing the school in the community	0.9	0	0.5	0	0.7	0	0.3	0.5
Counselling / disciplining of pupils	0.7	0.5	0.7	0	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.5
Consulting with parents	0.8	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.8	0.5	0.7	0.5
Dealing with visitors	**	**	**	**	0.8	1	0.5	0.5
Other	0.5	-	0.3	0	2.2	0	1.2	0
TOTAL	**34.2**		**33.1**		**37.1**		**32.0**	

**t-test* revealed a significant difference between 1995/96 and 2000/2001 mean times.
**This response category was not included in the 1996/97 questionnaire.

There were no significant differences between principals in single-teacher schools and those in schools with two or more teachers in the percentage of time they devoted to the various activities in a typical week. Teaching remained the most time-consuming activity for both groups in 1999/2000, occupying, on average, over 20 hours per week. Administrative tasks were the next most time-consuming activity in both single-teacher and multiple-teacher schools in 1999/2000 (2 hours and 48 minutes and 4.5 hours per week, respectively), followed by curriculum revision and planning (1 hour and 1.5 hours per week, respectively).

Research has demonstrated that one of the key characteristics of effective schools is a principal who is "proactive in working with teachers and…[is] the key resource person in helping teachers decide on and implement instructional strategies" (Kellaghan, 1994). Thus, principals were asked how much time they allocated to working with teachers. As was the case in 1995/96, principals in schools with two or more teachers reported spending approximately one and a half hours monitoring teaching and learning in classrooms and discussing educational objectives with teachers[2]. Furthermore, principals in multiple teacher schools spent an average of 3 hours per week representing the school in meetings and in the community, consulting with parents, and meeting visitors. In single-teacher schools, principals spent a mean of 2 hours per week on such tasks in 1999/2000.

For the most part, there were no significant changes since the outset of the scheme in the average amount of time that principals devoted to a variety of activities during a typical week. Consulting with specialist teachers was the only activity to which principals devoted significantly more time in 2000/2001 than in 1995/96. This finding is not surprising, however, given that there was an increase towards the end of the scheme in the percentage of schools that had access to remedial and specialist teachers (e.g., Arts & Crafts and drama teachers). However, while the listed activities represent a comprehensive analysis of how principals spend their working week, it should not be taken as a complete account of their work, as many principals may perform activities that were not listed. For example, principals also reported undertaking activities such as school maintenance and repairs, supervision of pupils, working with the *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator, and correction of pupils' work.

5.1.2. Accommodation and Equipment

In addition to seeking information about school personnel, the 1996/97 and 2000/2001 School Questionnaires sought information on the more "physical" attributes of the schools.

First, principals were asked to report on the number of undivided permanent classrooms in their schools. There was no change since the outset of the scheme in the mean number of such classrooms (2.88 in 1996/97 vs. 2.89 in 2000/2001) (Table 5.6). Furthermore, in both years, just over 80% of the rooms were in use as classrooms.

[2] Principals in single-teacher schools may have misinterpreted the item as they reported spending approximately 48 minutes per week working with other teachers. However, it is possible that they were referring to their work with the *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator.

Table 5.6. Mean number of undivided permanent classrooms in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools on June 30th 1996 (*N*=122) and during the 2000/2001 (*N*=115) school year. Also, percentages in use as classrooms.

	1995/96	**2000/2001**
Mean number of undivided permanent classrooms	2.89	2.88
% Used as classrooms	82.2%	83.7%

The 1996/97 and 2000/2001 School Questionnaires also asked about schools' outdoor facilities. Table 5.7 shows the percentage of schools which reported having a range of outdoor facilities in the 1995/96 and 2000/2001 school years.

Table 5.7. Percentages of principals (% Yes) who reported having a variety of outdoor facilities during 1995/96 and 2000/2001.

Facility	**School year**	**Number**	
		% Yes*	**Range**
Paved play area	1995/96 (*N*=122)	102 (83.6%)	3
	2000/2001 (*N*=115)	98 (85.2%)	2
Grass play area	1995/96 (*N*=122)	74 (60.6%)	3
	2000/2001 (*N*=116)	73 (62.9%)	3
Ball court	1995/96 (*N*=122)	60 (49.1%)	3
	2000/2001 (*N*=115)	75 (65.2%)	2
Shelter	1995/96 (*N*=122)	80 (65.5%)	3
	2000/2001 (*N*=117)	77 (65.8%)	3
Grass pitch	1995/96 (*N*=122)	45 (36.9%)	2
	2000/2001 (*N*=114)	42 (36.8%)	2
Other (e.g., tarmac yard, use of church yard)	1995/96 (*N*=116)	3 (2.6%)	1
	2000/2001 (*N*=59)	51 (86.4%)	1

*Percentage refers to the percentage of principals who responded to this item.

It appears that there was little change between 1995/96 and 2000/2001 in the percentage of schools that had access to a range of outdoor facilities. In both years, just under two-thirds of schools had a grass play area and shelter, and over 80% a paved play area. There was, however, a significant increase (χ^2=5.62; *df*=1; p<.05) in the percentage of schools that had a ball court (49.1% in 1995/96 vs. 65.2% in 2000/2001). Over one-third of schools also had access to a grass pitch. Finally, the majority of principals reported having access to other facilities, such as a tarmac yard.

Questions about schools' indoor facilities were also included in the School Questionnaires. Table 5.8 shows a sample of the types of rooms found in schools during the 1995/96 and 2000/2001 school years.

Table 5.8. Percentages of schools with different types of rooms (% Yes), during 1995/96 and 2000/2001. Also, percentages of these rooms that had a shared function, and that were converted classrooms.

Room Type	**School year**	**% Yes**	**% Shared**	**% Converted**
General purposes room	1995/96 (*N*=111)	43 (38.7%)	60.5%	58.1%
	2000/2001 (*N*=106)	44 (41.5%)	88.4%	39.5%
Arts / crafts room	1995/96 (*N*=110)	7 (6.4%)	85.7%	100.0%
	2000/2001 (*N*=100)	7 (7.0%)	85.7%	71.4%
Remedial teacher's room	1995/96 (*N*=122)	3 (2.5%)	66.3%	33.3%
	2000/2001 (*N*=104)	62 (59.6%)*	87.1%	32.3%
Principal's office	1995/96 (*N*=110)	5 (4.6%)	100.0%	-
	2000/2001 (*N*=102)	16 (15.7%)*	75.0%	18.8%
Secretary's / Administrative office	1995/96 (*N*=110)	7 (6.4%)	100.0%	-
	2000/2001 (*N*=102)	23 (22.6%)*	87.0%	20.0%
Dining / lunch room	1995/96 (*N*=110)	8 (7.3%)	75.0%	37.5%
	2000/2001 (*N*=98)	4 (4.1%)	50.0%	-
Staff room	1995/96 (*N*=108)	37 (34.3%)	73.0%	8.1%
	2000/2001 (*N*=107)	55 (51.4%)*	67.3%	7.3%
Teaching resources room	1995/96 (*N*=109)	7 (6.4%)	100.0%	42.9%
	2000/2001 (*N*=106)	16 (15.1%)	93.8%	18.8%
Other (e.g., Co-ordinator's room)	1995/96 (*N*=105)	10 (9.5%)	60.0%	30.0%
	2000/2001 (*N*=38)	17 (44.7%)*	76.5%	35.3%

* *t*-test revealed a significant difference between 1995/96 and 2000/2001 percentages.

In both 1995/96 and 2000/2001, only a minority of schools had an Arts and Crafts room, a dining room, and a teaching resources room. However, there was a significant increase between 1996/97 and 2000/2001 in the percentage of schools that had a principal's office (4.6% vs. 15.7% respectively) and an administrative office (6.4% vs. 22.6% respectively). Furthermore, over half of schools in 2000/2001 had a staff room, compared to 34.3% in 1995/96. There was also a significant increase (χ^2=86.55; *df*=1; p<.001) in the percentage of schools that had a remedial teacher's room in 2000/2001 (2.5% in 1995/96 vs. 59.6% in 2000/2001). Finally, 44.7% of schools reported having rooms which were classified as 'other', for example a co-ordinator's room.

Overall, it appears that schools' indoor facilities improved somewhat since the outset of the scheme. Furthermore, the finding that the majority of the rooms had a shared function suggests that schools were attempting to make productive use of the space available to them. However, the fact that the majority of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 felt that lack of space hindered their work (see Table 7.9 in Chapter 7) and over a quarter felt that the availability of facilities *hindered* the success of the scheme (Table 7.10) suggests that further efforts to accommodate co-ordinators might be required.

With regard to library facilities, although only five schools had a room which was used exclusively for a library, over one-third had a room which was used as a library as well as for other purposes (Table 5.9). Furthermore, the vast majority of principals in both years reported that there was a library in each classroom. Seven schools reported having no school or class library. However, 78.6% of principals in 2000/2001 indicated that their school availed of the services of the Local Authority Library.

Table 5.9. Numbers and percentages of principals who indicated if they had each of the four listed types of library facilities in their school.

Facility	Number % 1995/96 (*N*=122)	Number % 2000/2001 (*N*=117)
(a) A room used exclusively as a library	-	5 (4.3%)
(b) A room in which the school's collection of books was held which was also used for other purposes	13 (10.7%)	42 (35.9%)
(c) A library in each classroom	108 (88.5%)	99 (84.6%)
(d) No school library or class library	7 (5.7%)	7 (6.0%)

Principals were also asked about the availability of various types of equipment in the school. The data presented in Table 5.10 seem to suggest that the funding available under the scheme was beneficial in helping schools to acquire additional equipment. For example, between 1995/96 and 2000/2001, there was a significant increase in the percentage of schools that had at least one stereo-system (χ^2=11.02; *df*=1; *p*<.001), television (χ^2=17.48; *df*=1; *p*<.001), VCR (χ^2=11.49; *df*=1; *p*<.001), and printer (χ^2=42.50; *df*=1;, *p*<.001). Furthermore, the mean number of items of equipment in schools increased for all categories except slide projectors[3].

[3] In fact, there was also a significant decrease in the number of schools that had a slide projector. One explanation for this finding is that overhead projectors and videos have replaced the need for slide projectors.

Table 5.10. Number and percentage of schools that had different types of equipment, and the mean number of types of equipment in rural schools, during the 1995/96 and 2000/2001 school years.

Type of equipment	**1995/96 (*N*=121)**			**2000/2001 (*N*=117)**		
	Number with Equip.	% with equip.	Mean number per school	Number with Equip	% with Equip	Mean number per school
Radio / cassette player	112	92.6%	1.59	111	94.9%	1.97
Hi-fi stereo system	4	3.3%	0.03	20	17.1%	0.25
Overhead projector	39	32.2%	0.33	48	41.0%	0.44
Strip / Slide projector	79	65.3%	0.83	56	47.9%	0.56
Camera	2	1.7%	0.02	48	41.0%	0.45
Television	89	73.6%	0.78	114	94.4%	1.56
Video cassette recorder (VCR)	85	70.3%	0.73	104	88.9%	1.32
Camcorder/video camera	-	-	-	23	19.7%	0.20
Photocopier	104	86.0%	0.97	117	100%	1.03
Printer	59	48.8%	0.52	104	88.9%	2.18
Fax machine	-	-	-	8	6.8%	0.07
Other (e.g., Laminator)	9	7.4%	0.12	11	9.4%	0.12

Schools were significantly more likely to have various items of computer hardware / software in 2000/2001 than in 1995/96 (Table 5.11). For example, while only 2.5% of schools in 1995/96 had PCs with CD-Rom and modem, in 2000/2001, 89.7% of schools had PCs with CD-Rom and modem[4]. As can be seen in Table 5.11, there was also an increase in the mean number of items of computer equipment held by schools. The vast majority of principals indicated that the computer equipment was used primarily for teaching purposes.

It should be noted that in recent years, the Department of Education and Science introduced a number of programmes, including the Schools I.T. 2000 initiative, with the aim of enhancing Information and Communication Technologies in schools throughout the country. Thus, the fact that *Breaking the Cycle* pupils have improved access to computer facilities and equipment cannot be attributed solely to the scheme. Nonetheless, the finding is positive, given that skills in the area of information technology are increasingly important for advancement in education, work and leisure (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999).

[4] In fact, the percentage of principals who had access to a computer with a modem is likely higher, as 95.7% of principals in 2000/01 indicated that their school had access to email and Internet.

Table 5.11. Number and percentage of schools that had different types of computer equipment (Number % Yes) and the mean number of types of computer equipment in rural schools during 1995/96 (*N*=121) and 2000/2001 (*N*=117).

Equipment	School year	Number (%) Yes*	Mean number
PC with CD-ROM and modem	1995/96	3 (2.5%)	0.02
	2000/2001	105 (89.7%)**	2.63
PC with CD-ROM only	1995/96	12 (9.9%)	0.13
	2000/2001	65 (55.6%)**	1.58
PC with modem only	1995/96	1 (0.8%)	0.01
	2000/2001	3 (2.6%)	0.08
Other PC	1995/96	6 (5.0%)	0.10
	2000/2001	8 (6.8%)	0.16
CD-ROM discs	1995/96	10 (8.3%)	0.83
	2000/2001	78 (66.7%)**	24.8
Other computer (e.g., Acorn)	1995/96	9 (7.4%)	0.54
	2000/2001	27 (23.1%)**	0.43

* Percentages refer to the percentage of schools that had the equipment.
**Indicates where there was a significant increase between 1995/96 and 2000/2001 in the percentage of schools that had access to the item of equipment.

Overall, it appears that, compared to 1995/96, schools in 2000/2001 were better equipped. Given these findings, it is not surprising that principals in 2000/2001 were significantly more likely than in 1995/96 to report that their school's capacity to provide instruction in English, Mathematics, and Art and Craft was not at all affected by an inadequacy of equipment (other than books) (Table 5.12). For example, one-third of principals (31.9%) felt that English teaching in their school was quite a lot, or very much, affected by equipment shortages during the 1995/96 school year. However, in 2000/2001, only 9.8% of principals believed this to be the case (χ^2=15.58; *df*=1; *p*<.001). Similarly, there was a significant increase (χ^2=6.90; *df*=1; *p*<.01) between 1995/96 and 2000/2001 in the percentage of principals who felt that Mathematics teaching was not at all affected by equipment shortages (14.2% vs. 29.2% respectively).

Although there was a significant decrease in the percentage of principals who felt that teaching in P.E., Music, and Environmental Studies was quite a lot, or very much, affected by a shortage of equipment, it appears that there was slightly less improvement in school's capacity to teach in these curriculum areas. For example, one-third of principals continued to feel in 2000/2001 that the shortage of equipment hindered teaching in P.E. very much, and over a quarter felt that Environmental Studies teaching was quite a lot, or very much, affected by a lack of equipment. Notably, there was no change since the outset of the scheme in the percentage of principals who felt that Irish teaching was quite a lot, or very much, affected by equipment shortages, although this might be because there is a limited range of materials available for teaching Irish, rather than a lack of money to purchase equipment. These findings suggest that additional resources should be targeted at these curriculum areas. For the most part, however, the data indicate that improvements in schools' capacity to provide instruction in each of the main curriculum areas were substantial.

Table 5.12. Numbers and percentages of principals indicating the extent to which their school's capacity to provide instruction in each of the main curriculum areas was affected by a shortage or inadequacy of equipment (other than books) during the 1995/96 and 2000/2001 school years.

		Not at all	A little	Quite a lot	Very much
English	1995/96	25 (21.0%)	56 (47.1%)	26 (21.8%)	12 (10.1%)
	2000/2001	54 (48.2%)	47 (42.0%)	8 (7.1%)	3 (2.7%)
Irish	1995/96	21 (17.5%)	36 (30.0%)	39 (32.5%)	24 (20.0%)
	2000/2001	20 (17.5%)	40 (35.1%)	31 (27.2%)	23 (20.2%)
Mathematics	1995/96	17 (14.2%)	26 (21.7%)	53 (44.2%)	24 (20.0%)
	2000/2001	33 (29.2%)	56 (49.6%)	18 (15.9%)	6 (5.3%)
Environmental Studies	1995/96	12 (10.0%)	32 (26.7%)	51 (42.5%)	25 (20.8%)
	2000/2001	22 (19.3%)	52 (45.6%)	29 (25.4%)	11 (9.6%)
Art and craft	1995/96	13 (10.7%)	32 (26.4%)	48 (39.7%)	28 (23.1%)
	2000/2001	36 (32.4%)	40 (36.0%)	24 (21.6%)	11 (9.9%)
Music	1995/96	11 (9.2%)	25 (21.0%)	58 (48.7%)	25 (21.0%)
	2000/2001	19 (16.8%)	42 (37.2%)	40 (35.4%)	12 (10.6%)
P.E.	1995/96	9 (7.5%)	11 (9.2%)	23 (19.2%)	77 (64.2%)
	2000/2001	14 (12.2%)	24 (20.9%)	39 (33.9%)	38 (33.0%)

When principals were asked about the extent to which their school's capacity to provide instruction was affected by a shortage of *books*, a similar pattern of findings emerged (Table 5.13). There were significant increases in 2000/2001 in the percentage of principals who felt that their school's capacity to teach in English, Mathematics, Environmental Studies, and Art and Crafts was not at all affected by an inadequacy of books. This represents a considerable improvement from the 1995/96 school year, when almost one-third of principals (30.8%) felt that English teaching in their school was quite a lot, or very much affected; and 29.8% felt that the teaching of Mathematics was quite a lot, or very much, affected by book shortages. Again, there was slightly less improvement in Music and P.E., although there was a significant decrease in the percentage of principals who indicated that teaching in these areas was very much affected. Finally, there was no change in the percentage of principals who reported that Irish was quite a lot, or very much affected by a shortage of books, although, again, this may reflect a limited availability of Irish materials rather than a lack of money to purchase books.

Table 5.13. Numbers and percentages of principals indicating the extent to which their school's capacity to provide instruction in each of the main curriculum areas was affected by a shortage or inadequacy of books and workbooks during the 1995/96 and 2000/2001 schools years.

		Not at all	A little	Quite a lot	Very much
English	1995/96	34 (28.3%)	49 (40.8%)	24 (20.0%)	13 (10.8%)
	2000/2001	78 (69.0%)	30 (26.5%)	4 (3.5%)	1 (0.9%)
Irish	1995/96	27 (22.5%)	45 (37.5%)	32 (26.7%)	16 (13.3%)
	2000/2001	37 (31.9%)	35 (30.2%)	26 (22.4%)	18 (15.5%)
Mathematics	1995/96	32 (26.4%)	53 (43.8%)	18 (14.9%)	18 (14.9%)
	2000/2001	60 (52.2%)	35 (30.4%)	13 (11.3%)	7 (6.1%)
Environmental Studies	1995/96	18 (15.0%)	31 (25.8%)	44 (36.7%)	27 (22.5%)
	2000/2001	48 (42.1%)	45 (39.5%)	14 (12.3%)	7 (6.1%)
Art and craft	1995/96	26 (21.7%)	34 (28.3%)	38 (31.7%)	22 (18.3%)
	2000/2001	50 (43.5%)	36 (31.3%)	19 (16.5%)	10 (8.7%)
Music	1995/96	29 (24.2%)	36 (30.0%)	31 (25.8%)	24 (20.0%)
	2000/2001	37 (33.3%)	37 (33.3%)	27 (24.3%)	10 (9.0%)
P.E.	1995/96	41 (34.5%)	30 (25.2%)	16 (13.4%)	32 (26.9%)
	2000/2001	44 (39.6%)	32 (28.8%)	21 (18.0%)	15 (13.5%)

Finally, in both 1996/97 and 2000/2001, principals were asked whether their school operated a meal programme. In 1996/97, 44 principals reported that pupils could receive milk. In 40 of these schools, milk was subsidised for *all* pupils, while in the remaining four, the milk was subsidised for *some* pupils. In 2000/2001, one quarter of rural schools operated some type of meal scheme. When asked to specify the type of meal or beverage, 30 principals reported that their pupils received milk, with the majority indicating that the milk was subsidised for all. In both 1996/97 and 2000/2001, no principals indicated that any other type of subsidised or free food or beverage was available.

5.2. ENROLMENT AND ATTENDANCE

As well as examining the availability of personnel and resources in schools, the questionnaires completed by principals in each of the five years sought information about enrolment and attendance rates.

5.2.1. Enrolment

Table 5.14 presents the mean number of pupils enrolled in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000. As can be seen, mean enrolment was highest in 1995, the year before the introduction of the scheme (59.58 pupils). By 2000, the average enrolment rate had dropped significantly (t=2.35; df=235; p<.05) to 50.64 pupils. The finding that enrolment decreased

between 1995 and 2000 is of interest given that there was no change in the mean number of class teachers during this period. It is worth noting, however, that there was considerable variation in enrolment. For example, in 2000, there were 11 pupils in the smallest school, compared to 130 pupils in the largest school. The number of pupils enrolled also increased with class level, with the mean enrolment at Junior Infants ranging from 5.36 to 6.53 pupils and mean enrolment in 6th class ranging from 7.10 to 8.49 pupils between 1995/96 and 2000/2001.

Table 5.14. Total and mean number of pupils enrolled in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools on 30th September in 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000.

	Total school enrolment	**Mean enrolment**	**Minimum – maximum number enrolled**
30/9/95 (*N*=122)	7,328	59.58	11-130
30/9/96 (*N*=123)	7,080	57.56	11-123
30/9/97 (*N*=123)	6,804	55.32	10-119
30/9/98 (*N*=123)	6,613	53.76	7-111
30/9/99 (*N*=109)	5,568	51.08	6-119
30/9/2000 (*N*=115)	5,925	50.64	4-110

In addition to asking about total enrolment, some information was sought on the characteristics of the school population served by rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools. In 1998/99, 1999/2000 and 2000/2001, principals were asked to report on the number of children from the Travelling Community who were enrolled in their schools. In 1998/99 and 2000/2001, no principals reported having children from the Travelling Community[5]. In contrast, in 1999/2000, one school had seven and another had eight children from the Travelling Community. In 2000/2001, seven schools had children of refugees, asylum-seekers and non-nationals, with a total enrolment across the seven schools of 18 such pupils.

In a related item, principals were asked what percentage of pupils attending rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools during the 2000/2001 year were from the immediate locality. According to principals' estimates, 71.7% of pupils, on average, were from the immediate locality. However, principals' estimates were varied; some indicated that only 6% of pupils were from the immediate locality, others that all their pupils were.

5.2.2. Attendance

School attendance data were analysed to determine whether attendance had improved since the introduction of *Breaking the Cycle*. Principals were asked to refer to their school records and to

[5] Although no principals reported having children from the Travelling Community enrolled, one principal reported that the school had 33 children from the 'new age travelling and alternative lifestyle' community enrolled.

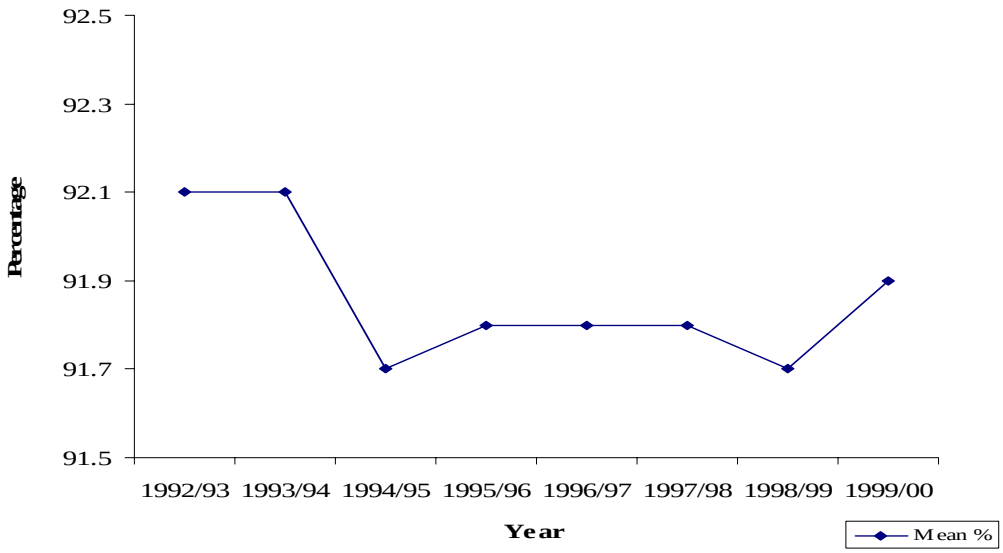
report the average annual attendance rate, the number of chronic low attenders, and the number of pupils referred to officials for poor attendance each year.

As can be seen from Table 5.15 and Figure 5.1, over the six-year period, the average attendance in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools remained stable at approximately 91.9%. Unfortunately there is no national or rural school attendance data available for these school years. The only figures available from the School Attendance Committees refer to attendance in Dublin City schools, where the average daily attendance rates in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99, and 1999/2000 were 91%, 91%, 90%, and 90%, respectively (School Attendance Committee, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000). Although the figures are not directly comparable, it appears that the attendance rate in rural schools participating in the scheme were similar to those in Dublin schools. Despite the fact that there were no significant *increases* in attendance rates since the outset of the scheme, for the most part, it appears that the average attendance rates in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools remained high throughout the pilot phase of the project.

Table 5.15. Statistics on percentage attendance rate in rural participating schools for the school years 1992/93 to 1999/2000.

School year	Mean %	*SD*	Mode
1992/93 (*N*=106 schools)	92.1%	3.15	92.0%
1993/94 (*N*=106 schools)	92.1%	3.34	93.0%
1994/95 (*N*=107 schools)	91.7%	3.18	93.0%
1995/96 (*N*=118 schools)	91.8%	3.20	93.0%
1996/97 (*N*=109 schools)	91.8%	4.81	93.0%
1997/98 (*N*=113 schools)	91.8%	4.00	94.0%
1998/99 (*N*=105 schools)	91.7%	3.06	95.0%
1999/2000 (*N*=110 schools)	91.9%	3.76	93.0%
1992/93 – 1999/2000	91.9%	-	-

Figure 5.1. Mean annual percentage attendance in schools from 1992/93 to 1999/2000.



Principals were asked to indicate the number of pupils in their school who were brought to the attention of the School Attendance Officer (SAO) or Gardaí for non-attendance at school, and the number of pupils against whom legal proceedings were brought for poor attendance each year (Table 5.16).

Table 5.16. Number of pupils who were brought to the attention of Gardaí / SAO for poor attendance during 1995/96, 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99, and 1999/2000.

	Number of pupils	% of Total Population
1995/96 (*N*=118 schools)	5	0.07%
1996/97 (*N*=109schools)	13	0.19%
1997/98 (*N*=113 schools)	3	0.06%
1998/99 (*N*=114 schools)	11	0.19%
1999/2000 (*N*=117 schools)	11	0.18%

Eleven pupils (or 0.18% of the total school population) were referred to the SAO in 1999/2000, compared to five (0.07%) in 1995/96. However, between 1995/96 and 1999/2000, no pupils had legal proceedings instituted against them. One possible explanation for this is that when pupils are referred to the SAO, their parents are issued with a statutory warning informing them that continued failure to ensure regular attendance may result in the initiation of legal proceedings under the School Attendance Act (School Attendance Committee, 1997). Often these cautions lead to an improvement and no further action is necessary.

It is worth noting that the School Attendance Act (1926) was replaced by the Education (Welfare) Act in July 2000. Rather than focusing on sanctions and enforcing punishments, the Education (Welfare) Act aims to tackle non-attendance by promoting positive attitudes to school and identifying and addressing the issues associated with non-attendance. However, given that the statutory changes were not enacted until July 2000, it is unlikely that the changes under the new Act had much impact on the data presented in this report.

As well as asking about average attendance rates, information was sought on very low attenders. Table 5.17 details the number of pupils who attended fewer than 10 days during the first quarter of each year. To ascertain the number of pupils who had genuine reasons for poor attendance, principals were also asked to indicate the number of pupils who did not attend due to illness or transfer to another school. In subtracting the number of ill pupils and transferees from the total of poor attenders, it was hoped that the remainder would give an indication of the number of chronic low attenders.

Table 5.17. Number of all pupils, transfers and ill pupils who attended fewer than 10 days school during the first quarter of school years 1995/96, 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

		Mean number	**Number of pupils**
1995/96 (*N*=122)	Total	0.33	40
	-less transfers	0.11	14
	-less ill pupils	0.09	11
	Remainder low attendees	**0.13**	**15**
1996/97 (*N*=120)	Total	0.18	22
	-less transfers	0.04	5
	-less ill pupils	0.08	9
	Remainder low attendees	**0.06**	**8**
1997/98 (*N*=116)	Total	0.31	36
	-less transfers	0.09	10
	-less ill pupils	0.03	4
	Remainder low attendees	**0.19**	**22**
1998/99 (*N*=113)	Total	0.27	30
	-less transfers	0.05	6
	-less ill pupils	0.06	7
	Remainder	**0.16**	**17**
1999/2000 (*N*=114)	Total	0.25	28
	-less transfers	0.18	21
	-less ill pupils	0.03	3
	Remainder	**0.04**	**4**

There was a significant decrease (t=9.45; df=233; p<.001) between 1995/96 and 1999/2000 in the mean number of chronic low attenders during the first quarter of the school year (0.13 vs. 0.04 respectively). In contrast, the overall difference in the mean number of chronic low attenders in the last three quarters of the school year between 1995/96 and 1999/2000 was marginal (Table 5.18). However, the numbers of pupils with such poor attendance records are very small (an average of 0.35 pupils in 1995/96 vs. 0.29 pupils in 1999/2000).

Table 5.18. Numbers and percentages of all pupils, transfers and ill pupils who attended less than 25 days schools during the second, third and fourth quarter of the school year in 1995/96, 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

School year		2nd Quarter Mean Number	3rd Quarter Mean Number	4th Quarter Mean Number	Total Mean Number
1995/96 (*N*=122 schools)	Total	0.25	0.34	0.47	**1.06**
	-less transfers	0.11	0.21	0.21	**0.53**
	-less ill pupils	0.04	0.07	0.07	**0.18**
	Remainder low attendees	**0.10**	**0.06**	**0.19**	**0.35**
1996/97 (*N*=120 schools)	Total	0.24	0.25	0.36	**0.85**
	-less transfers	0.08	0.10	0.16	**0.34**
	-less ill pupils	0.05	0.06	0.05	**0.16**
	Remainder low attendees	**0.11**	**0.09**	**0.15**	**0.35**
1997/98 (*N*=116 schools)	Total	0.23	0.15	0.32	**0.70**
	-less transfers	0.11	0.05	0.13	**0.29**
	-less ill pupils	0.06	0.04	0.06	**0.16**
	Remainder low attendees	**0.06**	**0.06**	**0.13**	**0.25**
1998/99 (*N*= 100 schools)	Total	0.27	0.15	0.31	**0.73**
	-less transfers	0.12	0.05	0.06	**0.23**
	-less ill pupils	0.05	0.04	0.04	**0.13**
	Remainder low attendees	**0.10**	**0.06**	**0.21**	**0.37**
1999/2000 (*N*=108 schools)	Total	0.27	0.19	0.32	**0.78**
	-less transfers	0.16	0.10	0.05	**0.31**
	-less ill pupils	0.06	0.04	0.08	**0.18**
	Remainder low attendees	**0.05**	**0.05**	**0.19**	**0.29**

In the final year of the pilot phase of the scheme, principals were asked to describe the main reasons why they felt pupils were frequently absent from school. For economy of reporting, principals' responses were grouped into categories, and are presented in Table 5.19.

Table 5.19. Number and percentage of principals (*N*=80*) who put forward different reasons for why some pupils are frequently absent from school during the 1999/2000 school year.

Comment	Number (%)**
Children are absent due to illness (e.g., frequent tummy bugs or colds) / general poor health	50 (62.5%)
Lack of parental interest, motivation and commitment to education (general comment) / parents do not value education	20 (25.0%)
Dysfunctional families / family problems (general)	11 (13.8%)
Holiday during term / other family outings	9 (11.3%)
Children are helping on farm / helping in the home (e.g., childminding)	8 (10.0%)
Parents are unable to get children ready for school in the morning for a variety of reasons (e.g., sleeping late, late nights at weekends)	7 (8.8%)
Doctor / dentist appointment	6 (7.5%)
Parents let pupils stay home when they don't feel like going to school	5 (6.3%)
Other (e.g., unexpected trauma such as bereavement or accident, poor weather)	24 (30.0%)

*20 principals reported that there were no problems with absenteeism.

**Percentages do not sum to 100% as principals were permitted to give more than one response.

The majority of principals reported that pupils were frequently absent for legitimate reasons, such as illness or general poor health (62.5%) or dentist/doctor appointments (7.5%). This finding is consistent with research which indicates that illness is usually the most common reason for school non-attendance (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 1995). However, a number of principals also felt that parents had a huge bearing on pupils' failure to attend. For example, a quarter of principals felt parents' lack of interest or commitment to their children's education played a role in pupils' non-attendance, while eleven (13.8%) reported that family problems resulted in poor attendance. Seven principals (8.8%) said that some parents were unable to get their children ready for school in the morning, for example, because they regularly slept in. Furthermore, over 20% of principals indicated that children were frequently absent due to family holidays during term, or because children were kept at home to help on the farm, for example. This may explain, in part, why the mean number of chronic low attenders was slightly higher during the 4th quarter of the school year (i.e., in the summer months) than during the first three quarters. A minority of principals (6.3%) also indicated that some parents let pupils stay home when they did not feel like attending. For example:

> …poor parenting skills when parents appear powerless to make their children go to school when they don't want to.

> …neglect by parents who are not sufficiently interested or educationally motivated to send their child to school. Over indulgence by parents so that they are allowed to be absent for trivial reasons.

Finally, 30% of principals gave reasons which were subsequently classified as 'other'. For example, one principal noted that:

> Occasionally young child has difficulty being separated from parents

Overall, however, the finding that the average daily attendance rate remained high throughout the duration of the scheme, and the fact that the number of chronic low attenders was very small, suggests that attendance is not a major problem in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools. This finding is promising, particularly in light of research which has generally demonstrated an association between pupils' attendance and their attainment (e.g., Mullis, Martin, Gonzalez, O'Connor, Chrostowski, Gregory, Garden, & Smith, 2001; Malcolm, Thorpe, & Lowden, 1996). Nevertheless, given that over a quarter of principals put forward reasons for absenteeism which were in some way related to pupils' parents, perhaps further consideration should be given to attendance promotion strategies which target *parents* as well as pupils.

5.3. DISCIPLINE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENTS

In addition to asking about enrolment and attendance rates, information was also sought on other pupil-centred issues, such as psychological assessments, discipline, and pupil retention rates.

5.3.1. Discipline

In both the 1995/96 and 2000/2001 School Questionnaire, principals were asked to indicate the number of pupils who had been brought to their attention for different types of misbehaviour during the school year. Table 5.20 presents principals' responses. Data are provided separately for pupils in Junior classes (Junior Infants through to second), Middle classes (third and fourth), and Senior classes (fifth and sixth).

Table 5.20. Percentages and numbers of Junior, Middle, and Senior pupils brought to the principal's attention for varying types of misbehaviour during 1995/96 (*N*=122 schools) and during 1999/2000 (*N*=114 schools).

	School year	Junior		Middle		Senior	
		%*	*N*	%*	*N*	%*	*N*
a) late arrival at school	1995/1996	**1.97%**	(64)	**3.66%**	(67)	**3.00%**	(60)
	1999/2000	**3.93%** **	(107)	**2.62%**	(39)	**2.30%**	(36)
b) absenteeism	1995/1996	**2.09%**	(68)	**3.72%**	(68)	**2.10%**	(42)
	1999/2000	**2.02%**	(55)	**2.21%****	(33)	**3.07%**	(48)
c) classroom disturbance	1995/1996	**3.08%**	(100)	**6.56%**	(120)	**6.79%**	(136)
	1999/2000	**3.05%**	(83)	**6.37%**	(95)	**8.32%**	(130)
d) vandalising school property	1995/1996	**0.15%**	(5)	**1.09%**	(20)	**1.87%**	(38)
	1999/2000	**0.33%**	(9)	**0.60%**	(9)	**1.99%**	(31)
e) theft of school property	1995/1996	—	(0)	**0.33%**	(6)	**0.35%**	(7)
	1999/2000	—	(0)	**0.27%**	(4)	**0.19%**	(3)
f) bullying of other pupils	1995/1996	**1.88%**	(61)	**5.90%**	(108)	**7.49%**	(150)
	1999/2000	**2.24%**	(61)	**5.43%**	(81)	**7.55%**	(118)
g) verbal abuse of staff	1995/1996	**0.12%**	(4)	**0.60%**	(11)	**1.38%**	(28)
	1999/2000	**0.26%**	(7)	**1.07%**	(16)	**1.60%**	(25)
h) physical abuse of staff	1995/1996	**0.03%**	(1)	—	(0)	**0.05%**	(1)
	1999/2000	**0.15%**	(4)	**0.07%**	(1)	—	(0)
i) alcohol use	1995/1996	—	(0)	—	(0)	**0.10%**	(2)
	1999/2000	—	(0)	—	(0)	**0.13%**	(2)
j) tobacco use	1995/1996	—	(0)	**0.33%**	(6)	**0.88%**	(18)
	1999/2000	—	(0)	**0.13%**	(2)	**0.19%****	(3)
k) illegal drug use	1995/1996	—	(0)	—	(0)	—	(0)
	1999/2000	—	(0)	—	(0)	—	(0)
l) weapon use/ possession	1995/1996	**0.09%**	(3)	**0.05%**	(1)	**0.15%**	(3)
	1999/2000	—	(0)	**0.27%**	(4)	—	(0)
m) other	1995/1996	**0.03%**	(1)	**0.49%**	(9)	**0.30%**	(6)
	1999/2000	**0.04%**	(1)	**0.07%**	(1)	**0.06%**	(1)

*1995/96 percentages are derived from the number of pupils in Junior, Middle and Senior classes, as given in the school's original *Breaking the Cycle* applications.

** *t-test* revealed a significant difference between 1996/97 and 1999/2000 percentages.

In 1999/2000, the most common problem among Junior class pupils was late arrival at school (3.93%), followed by classroom disturbance (3.05%), and bullying of other pupils (2.24%). Although there was a significant increase (χ^2=19.76; *df*=1; *p*<.001) in 1999/2000 in the percentage of pupils who were brought to the principals' attention for late arrival (1.97% in 1996/97 vs. 3.93% in 1999/2000), there were no changes in the prevalence of the various other types of misbehaviour among Junior class pupils.

Among Middle class pupils, the most prevalent types of misbehaviour in 1999/2000 were classroom disturbance (6.37%), followed by bullying of other pupils (5.43%), and late arrival at school (2.62%). With the exception of absenteeism, which decreased significantly (χ^2=5.85; *df*=1; *p*<.05) between 1995/96 and 1999/2000 (3.72% vs. 2.21% respectively), there were no changes in the prevalence of the various other types of misbehaviour among Middle class pupils since the outset of the scheme.

In 1999/2000, the most common type of misbehaviour among Senior class pupils was classroom disturbance (8.32%), followed by bullying of other pupils (7.55%), and absenteeism (3.07%). Although there was a significant decrease (χ^2=6.14; *df*=1; *p*<.05) in the prevalence of tobacco use between 1995/96 and 1999/2000 (0.88% vs. 0.19%), there were no differences in the prevalence of the various other types of problem among Senior class pupils.

The incidence of the various other types of misbehaviour, including verbal and physical abuse of staff, alcohol, tobacco and illegal drug use, and weapon possession, among pupils at all levels was low.

Principals were asked to report the number of pupils for whom disciplinary procedures were invoked for the same types of misbehaviour. As can be seen in Table 5.21, with the exception of late arrival at school, the percentage of pupils for whom disciplinary procedures were invoked for various types of misbehaviour increased with age. However, this finding is not surprising, given that the incidence of most problems also increased with age (Table 5.20).

Table 5.21. Percentages and numbers of Junior, Middle, and Senior class pupils for whom disciplinary procedures were invoked during 1995/96 (*N*=122 schools) and during 1999/2000 (*N*=113 schools).

	School year	**Junior**		**Middle**		**Senior**	
		%*	***N***	**%***	***N***	**%***	***N***
a) late arrival at school	1995/1996	**0.58%**	(19)	**1.53%**	(28)	**1.40%**	(28)
	1999/2000	**0.63%**	(17)	**1.29%**	(19)	**1.04%**	(16)
b) absenteeism	1995/1996	**0.92%**	(30)	**1.48%**	(27)	**0.70%**	(14)
	1999/2000	**0.93%**	(25)	**1.22%**	(18)	**1.62%**	(25)
c) classroom disturbance	1995/1996	**2.49%**	(81)	**4.81%**	(88)	**6.64%**	(133)
	1999/2000	**2.82%**	(76)	**5.58%**	(82)	**7.27%**	(112)
d) vandalising school property	1995/1996	**0.03%**	(1)	**0.93%**	(17)	**1.65%**	(33)
	1999/2000	**0.33%**	(9)	**0.61%**	(9)	**1.75%**	(27)
e) theft of school property	1995/1996	-	-	**0.33%**	(6)	**0.30%**	(6)
	1999/2000	-	-	**0.07%**	(1)	**0.19%**	(3)
f) bullying of other pupils	1995/1996	**1.14%**	(37)	**4.05%**	(74)	**6.39%**	(128)
	1999/2000	**1.86%**	(50)	**4.42%**	(65)	**6.36%**	(98)
g) verbal abuse of staff	1995/1996	**0.31%**	(10)	**0.87%**	(16)	**1.38%**	(28)
	1999/2000	**0.19%**	(5)	**1.02%**	(15)	**1.30%**	(20)
h) physical abuse of staff	1995/1996	-	-	**0.11%**	(2)	**0.15%**	(3)
	1999/2000	**0.07%**	(2)	**0.07%**	(1)	-	-
i) alcohol use	1995/1996	-	-	-	-	**0.05%**	(1)
	1999/2000	-	-	-	-	-	-
j) tobacco use	1995/1996	-	-	**0.22%**	(4)	**0.55%**	(11)
	1999/2000	-	-	-	-	**0.13%**	(2)
k) illegal drug use	1995/1996	-	-	**0.05%**	(1)	-	-
	1999/2000	-	-	-	-	-	-
l) weapon use/possession	1995/1996	**0.03%**	(1)	**0.05%**	(1)	**0.05%**	(1)
	1999/2000	-	-	**0.20%**	(3)	**0.07%**	(1)
m) other	1995/1996	**0.03%**	(1)	**0.49%**	(9)	**0.30%**	(6)
	1999/2000	**0.07%**	(2)	-	-	-	-

*1995/96 percentages are derived from the number of pupils in Junior, Middle and Senior classes, as given in the school's original *Breaking the Cycle* applications.

In 1999/2000, there was a disparity between the prevalence and discipline rates for both late arrival at school and absenteeism. For example, while 3.93% of Junior class pupils were brought to the principals' attention for late arrival at school, only 0.63% of Junior class pupils were formally disciplined for arriving late. A similar trend was evident in 1995/96. This finding may explain, to some extent, why there was a significant *increase* in the prevalence of this problem at this class level. Furthermore, it appears that only a minority of pupils who were brought to the principal's attention for absenteeism were disciplined. For example, while 3.07% of Senior class pupils were brought to the principal's attention for absenteeism, only 1.62% were disciplined. In contrast, in 1999/2000, most of the pupils who were brought to the principal's attention for misbehaviour such as disrupting class, vandalising school property, stealing school property, bullying other pupils, and verbally abusing staff, were formally disciplined.

Table 5.22 outlines the prevalence of the four most common types of misbehavior across all grade levels, and the percentage of pupils who were disciplined. Again, the discipline rates for late arrival at school and absenteeism were disproportionate in both years. For example, in 2000/2001, only a quarter of the pupils who were late for school were formally disciplined. Overall, there were no significant changes since the outset of the scheme in the percentage of pupils who were brought to the attention of the principal or disciplined for classroom disturbance, bullying of other pupils, late arrival to school and absenteeism. However, it is worth noting that the prevalence of each type of misbehavior was low in both years.

Table 5.22. Total numbers and percentages of pupils brought to the principal's attention for varying types of misbehaviour during 1995/96 (*N*=122 schools) and 1999/2000 (*N*=114 schools).

Misbehavior	School year	Prevalence		Disciplined		% pupils disciplined
		%	*N*	%	*N*	
a) classroom disturbance	1995/1996	**4.89%**	356	**4.15%**	302	84.8%
	1999/2000	**5.20%**	308	**4.67%**	270	87.6%
b) bullying of other pupils	1995/1996	**4.38%**	319	**3.28%**	239	74.9%
	1999/2000	**4.39%**	260	**3.69%**	213	81.9%
c) late arrival at school	1995/1996	**2.62%**	191	**1.03%**	75	39.3%
	1999/2000	**3.07%**	182	**0.90%**	52	28.6%
d) absenteeism	1995/1996	**2.45%**	178	**0.98%**	71	39.9%
	1999/2000	**2.30%**	136	**1.18%**	68	50.0%

In a related item, principals were asked about the number of sanctions for serious breaches of discipline that were applied in their schools in 1995/96 and 1999/2000. As Table 5.23 illustrates, compared to 1995/96, principals applied fewer 3-day suspensions[6]. In 2000/2001, there were no 10-

[6] It is worth noting that the number of suspensions reported in Table 5.23 may not give an accurate indication of the number of pupils to whom they were applied, as one pupil may have received more than one suspension. In fact, only two pupils received more than one 3-day suspension.

day suspensions, suspensions longer than 10 days, or suspensions which resulted in a transfer to another school, and only one pupil was suspended where no alternative arrangements for transfer were made. There was a slight increase in the total number of serious breaches which did not warrant a suspension (49 in 1995/96 vs. 55 1999/2000). However, since only a small number of pupils received longer suspensions in both 1995/96 and 1999/2000, it is difficult to ascertain whether the scheme had an impact in this area.

Table 5.23. Mean and total number of sanctions for serious breaches of discipline applied in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1995/96 (*N*=122) and 1999/2000 (*N*=109).

Number of ...	School year	Total	Range
3-day suspensions	1995/96	13	5
	1999/2000	6	2
10-day suspensions	1995/96	1	1
	1999/2000	-	-
Suspensions longer than 10 days	1995/96	-	-
	1999/2000	-	-
Serious breach not warranting suspension	1995/96	49	14
	1999/2000	55	10
Suspended pupils for whom arrangements were made for transfer to another school	1995/96	-	-
	1999/2000	-	-
Suspended pupils for whom no alternative arrangements were made for transfer to another school	1995/96	1	1
	1999/2000	1	1

5.3.2. Psychological Assessments

Principals were asked about the use of, and need for, psychological assessment of their pupils. The first item in this section asked principals to indicate the percentage of pupils currently on their school rolls who had ever been assessed. They were then asked to report the percentage of pupils they felt needed assessment. Principals' responses are presented in Table 5.24.

Table 5.24. Percentage of pupils in 1999/2000 who were psychologically assessed and the percentage of pupils principals believed needed assessment.

School year	**% Assessed**		**% Needing Assessment**	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
1996/97 (*N*=118)	4.08%	4.64	9.40%	9.07
1997/98 (*N*=118)	4.72%	4.14	9.02%	7.83
1998/99 (*N*=111)	5.91%	5.08	8.04%	7.47
1999/2000 (*N*=115)	6.82%	8.24	9.28%	8.24

In 1999/2000, principals reported that 6.82% of pupils currently in their school had been psychologically assessed. Further analysis indicates that there was a significant increase (t=3.14; df=231; p<.01) in the percentage of pupils who had ever been assessed by a psychologist between 1996/97 and 1999/2000 (4.08% vs. 6.82% respectively). In contrast, there was little change since 1996/97 in the percentage of pupils who principals felt *needed* psychological assessment. Thus, the

discrepancy between the percentage of pupils who principals felt needed assessment, and the percentage of who had ever been assessed was smaller towards the end of the scheme. Nevertheless, the fact that only two-thirds of the pupils who were deemed in need of assessment were actually assessed in 1999/2000 suggests that inadequacies in the psychological assessment services in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools remain.

Martin and Hickey (1993) reported that at all stages of psychological assessment, from initial referral to enrolment in a special class or school, boys outnumbered girls by a ratio of approximately two to one. To ascertain whether there were gender differences in the referral and assessment rates in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools, the total number of referrals and assessments were analysed by gender and class level (Tables 5.25 and 5.26).

Table 5.25. Number of boys and girls and percentage of the total class population *referred* for assessment by grade in 1995/96, 1996/97, 1997/98 and 1998/99.

	1995/96 (*N*=122)			**1996/97** (*N*=119)			**1997/98** (*N*=115)			**1998/99** (*N*=93)		
	Total No. of Referrals		% of Total Class *	Total No. of Referrals		% of Total Class *	Total No. of Referrals		% of Total Class *	Total No. of Referrals		% of Total Class *
	Boys	Girls		Boys	Girls		Boys	Girls		Boys	Girls	
JI	12	2**	1.8%	11	5	1.7%	7	3	1.5%	8	2	2.0%
SI	17	5**	2.7%	11	5	1.8%	17	5**	3.1%	4	2	1.2%
I	19	6**	3.0%	21	5**	2.9%	12	6	2.4%	20	6**	4.5%
II	2	4**	2.7%	18	2**	2.5%	13	6	2.5%	15	8	4.0%
III	14	8	2.4%	23	9**	3.6%	15	3**	2.4%	21	10	5.5%
IV	26	3**	3.0%	8	5	1.5%	20	8**	3.3%	14	7	3.6%
V	8	7	1.5%	12	6	1.9%	10	3	1.5%	13	3**	2.7%
VI	10	4	1.3%	6	2	0.9%	7	2	1.0%	11	2**	2.0%
TOTAL	**126**	**39****	**2.3%**	**110**	**39****	**2.1%**	**101**	**36****	**2.1%**	**106**	**40****	**3.2%**

*Percentage of total class population in schools for which principals had completed the item.
**Significantly more boys than girls from these classes were referred.

In 1995/96, 1996/97, and 1997/98, approximately 2% of the total class population were referred for assessment. These finding are consistent with the figures reported by the Planning Group for the National Educational Psychological Service, as they estimated that approximately 2% of the school population per year are appropriately referred for psychological assessment (Department of Education, 1998). Of interest is the finding that there was a slight increase in 1998/99 in the percentage of pupils who were referred for assessment (3.2% in 1998/99 vs. 2.1% in 1997/98). When the percentage of pupils who were actually assessed was examined, a similar picture emerges (Table 5.26).

Table 5.26. Number of boys and girls and as a percentage of the total class population *assessed* by grade, in 1995/96, 1996/97, 1997/98 and 1998/99.

	1995/96 (*N*=122)			**1996/97** (*N*=119)			**1997/98** (*N*=115)			**1998/99** (*N*=92)		
	Total No. of Assessments		% of Total Class *	Total No. of Assessments		% of Total Class *	Total No. of Assessments		% of Total Class *	Total No. of Assessments		% of Total Class *
	Boys	Girls		Boys	Girls		Boys	Girls		Boys	Girls	
JI	9	0**	1.1%	6	3	1.0%	2	2	0.6%	4	1	1.0%
SI	8	2	1.2%	8	2	1.1%	14	2**	2.1%	4	1	1.0%
I	15	5**	2.4%	6	5	1.2%	9	4	1.7%	13	3**	2.8%
II	18	3**	2.3%	17	0**	2.1%	12	1**	1.7%	12	6	3.2%
III	13	3**	1.8%	13	7	2.2%	10	1**	1.5%	10	8	3.2%
IV	16	4**	2.1%	9	4	1.5%	14	6	2.3%	12	4**	2.8%
V	8	7	1.5%	9	4	1.3%	7	2	1.0%	10	0**	1.7%
VI	7	4	1.0%	6	1	0.8%	4	0**	1.0%	6	2	1.3%
TOTAL	**94**	**28****	**1.7%**	**74**	**26****	**1.4%**	**72**	**18****	**1.4%**	**71**	**25****	**2.1%**

*Percentage of total class population in schools for which principals had completed the item.
**Significantly more boys than girls from these classes were assessed.

Approximately 1.5% of the total class population was assessed in 1995/96, 1996/97 and 1997/98. However, the percentage of pupils assessed increased to 2.1% in 1998/99. The finding that the percentage of pupils who were referred, and the percentage who were actually assessed, increased in 1998/99 might be due, in part, to the introduction in 1999 of the National Educational Psychological Service. The programme, which is funded by the Department of Education and Science, aims to tackle the lack of availability of psychological services in schools throughout the country (Department of Education, 1998). Nevertheless, the findings are no reason for complacency, as there continued to be a discrepancy between the referral and assessment rates in 1999/2000, and when principals were asked to explain why pupils did not undergo assessment, the most common reason given in each of the four years was that pupils were still on a waiting list.

Further analysis of the data in Tables 5.25 and 5.26 revealed that the mean number of boys who were referred for psychological assessment was significantly higher than the mean number of girls who were referred for assessment in 1995/96 (t=4.80; df=242; p<.001), 1996/97 (t=3.85; df=244; p<.001), 1997/98 (t=4.28; df=228; p<.001), and 1998/99 (t=4.22; df=184; p<.001). When the number of boys and girls who were *assessed* over the same time period was examined, a similar pattern emerged (Table 5.26). The mean number of boys assessed was found to be significantly greater than the mean number of girls assessed in 1996/97 (t=4.13; df=242; p<.001), 1997/98 (t=-3.06; df=244; p<.01), 1998/99 (t=4.39; df=228; p<.001), and 1998/99 (t=3.39; df=228; p<.001). These findings are consistent with those of Martin and Hickey (1993).

Principals in 1999/2000 were asked to indicate the three main reasons boys were referred, and the three main reasons girls were referred for psychological assessment. The wording of this item was slightly different in the 1998/99 School Questionnaire, as principals were asked to report the three main reasons why *pupils* were referred for assessment, and were not required to differentiate between boys and girls. Principals' responses were categorised to facilitate reporting and are presented in Table 5.27.

Table 5.27. Percentages* of schools that gave various reasons why pupils (boys / girls) were referred for psychological assessment in 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

Category	**1998/99 Boys & Girls** % (*N*=94)**	**1999/2000 Girls % (*N*=112)**	**1999/2000 Boys % (*N*=113)**
General low academic performance / lack of progress / below class standard / poor concentration	66.0%	0.66%	0.6666.0%
Behavioural problems / disruptive child / withdrawn child / social interaction difficulties / communication difficulties / lacks social skills	55.3%	0.553%	0.55853%
Poor language / verbal ability / reading problems	14.9%	14.3%	0.292%
Emotionally disturbed / help cope with specific event (e.g., bereavement) / low self-esteem	12.8%	5.4%	9.7%
Specific learning difficulty / to diagnose a specific learning difficulty (e.g., dyslexia, ADD) / to identify appropriate intervention	51.1%	5.4%	8.8%
Child unhappy in school / unable to work in class / poor concentration in class / inattentive	7.5%	6.3%	7.9%
Parents requested assessment	7.5%	8.1%	0.156%
Teacher requested assessment	-	5.4%	0.0543%
Special needs (e.g., autism, Down's Syndrome)	-	4.5%	1.7%
Placement in special school / class / programme	1.1%	0.9%	0.9%
Other	16.0%	10.8%	0.268%

*Percentages do not sum to 100% as principals were permitted to give more than one response.
**The 1998/99 questionnaire item did not make a distinction between boys and girls.

As can be seen in Table 5.27, there were no changes between 1998/99 and 1999/2000 in the two main reasons why pupils were referred for psychological assessment. In both years, the vast majority of principals referred pupils for psychological assessment because of poor academic performance or lack of progress. Behavioural problems were the second most common reason for referral. There was a considerable discrepancy between 1998/99 and 1999/2000 in the percentage of principals that reported that pupils were referred for a specific learning difficulty. While this finding may be related to the increase in the availability of remedial teachers in 1999/2000, it is possible that the discrepancy is due to differences in coding.

Further analysis of principals' responses in 1999/2000 indicates that boys were significantly more likely (χ^2=9.28; *df*=1; *p*<.01) than girls to be referred for assessment because of poor academic performance (74.0% vs. 53.6% respectively). Furthermore, the percentage of boys who were referred for assessment because of behavioural problems significantly exceeded (χ^2=12.76; *df*=1; *p*<.001) the percentage of girls who were referred for this reason (55.7% vs. 31.2% respectively).

Boys and girls were equally likely to be referred for assessment for other reasons, including specific learning difficulties, problems with concentration in school, to determine special placement in a class, or on the request of teachers or parents.

Finally, principals were asked to elaborate on the outcomes of pupil assessments. In 1995/96, 1996/97, and 1997/98, pupils were most likely to be referred back to their existing class. The next most common outcome was that pupils were referred to a special school/class but instead returned to their ordinary class and received support from a remedial or resource teacher. In 1998/99 this outcome was the most common, followed by referral back to their existing class. The fact that pupils were more likely to return to their ordinary class and receive help from remedial teachers in 1999/2000 suggests that the increased availability of remedial teachers has been beneficial.

5.3.3. Pupil retention

Principals were asked to indicate the number of pupils who were retained in grade in 1996/97 and 2000/2001. Table 5.28 shows the total number and percentage of pupils retained at each class level. In 1995/96, pupils in Junior Infants, Senior Infants and 6th class were most likely to be retained. In contrast, in 1999/2000, the highest retention rates were in Senior Infants, 1st and 5th class. Overall, when the pupil retention rates for all classes are examined, there was a significant decrease (*t*=3.50; *df*=220; *p*<.001) in the mean rate between 1995/96 and 1999/2000 (1.86 pupils vs. 0.98 pupils, respectively).

Table 5.28. Total number and percentage of pupils retained at each class level in rural schools at the end of the 1995/96 school year (*N*=122 schools) and at the end of the 1999/2000 school year (*N*=114 schools).

School year	J.I.	S.I.	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Total
1995/96	44 5.60%	28 3.46%	20 2.43%	17 1.88%	20 2.22%	23 2.38%	25 2.51%	31 2.92%	**208** **2.9%**
1999/2000	19 2.98%	10 1.62%	18 2.62%	15 2.10%	6 0.81%	6 0.82%	21 2.82%	19 2.38%	**115** **2.0%**

In a follow-up question, principals were asked what reasons they had for retaining children in a class. In 1996/97, over one-third of principals (39.5%) said that pupils were often retained because of poor academic progress, while 53.9% cited immaturity as the reason (Table 5.29). In 2000/2001, academic progress and immaturity remained the two most frequently cited reasons for retention. A quarter of principals in 1995/96 and one-third in 2000/2001 also indicated that children were retained at the request of the child's parents. Furthermore, 13.6% reported a learning difficulty as a reason for retention, while a minority of principals gave reasons such as poor attendance and teachers' recommendations. Finally, eleven principals (18.6%) gave reasons which were classified as 'other', including, for example, family problems.

Table 5.29. Number and percentage of principals in 1996/97 and 2000/2001 who put forward different reasons for retention of children in a class.

Reason	**Number (%)* 1995/96** (*N*=76)	**Number (%)* 2000/2001** (*N*=59)
Immaturity / children too young	41 (53.9%)	28 (47.5%)
Poor academic progress	30 (39.5%)	28 (47.5%)
Parent's request	21 (27.6%)	20 (33.9%)
Learning difficulty (e.g., dyslexia)	8 (10.5%)	8 (13.6%)
Not ready to transfer to second level	-	5 (8.5%)
Poor attendance / missed classes / did not complete full year	8 (10.5%)	3 (5.1%)
Teacher's recommendation	8 (10.5%)	3 (5.1%)
Other (e.g., family problems; transfer from another school)	5 (6.5%)	11 (18.6%)

*Percentages refer to percentages of principals who had retained pupils; percentages do not sum to 100% as some principals gave more than one response.

5.4. HOME-SCHOOL LINKS

An important element of any scheme aimed at tackling educational disadvantage is to promote the development of links between the home and the school. For this reason, questionnaires for principals included a range of items regarding home-school links. In 1996/97 and 2000/2001, principals were asked about various meetings between parents and school staff. They were also asked two questions about their perceptions of parental interest and expectations regarding their children's education. Finally, the 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 questionnaires sought information on the activities and courses provided for parents.

Between 1995/96 and 2000/2001, there was a significant increase (t=2.51; df=230; p<.05) in the percentage of parents who were invited to meet principals to discuss a specific issue relating to their child (5.85% vs. 10.77% respectively) (Table 5.30). In both years, the majority of parents who were invited attended the meeting (97.15% and 96.40% respectively). Furthermore, there was a significant increase in 2000/2001 (t=2.51; df=230; p<.05) in the percentage of parents who visited the school on their own initiative (28.49% in 1995/96 vs. 39.31% in 2000/2001). Finally, there was a significant increase (t=2.86; df=226; p<.01) since the outset of the scheme in the percentage of teachers who visited homes (19.19% in 2000/2001 vs. 9.05% in 1995/96). This finding might be due, in part, to the establishment of the co-ordinator post, as one of the functions of the co-ordinator was to release teachers for home-visits. Taken together, these findings suggest that the scheme was successful in promoting parents' interest in their children's education and increasing communication between school staff and parents.

Table 5.30. Principals' estimates of the percentage of various parent-staff meetings which took place during the 1995/96 and 2000/2001 school years.

Percentage of ...	**School year**	**Mean %**	**Mode**	**Range**
Parents were asked to meet the principal to discuss a specific issue relating to the child	1995/96 (N=122)	5.85%	0	100
	2000/2001 (N=115)	10.77%	0	100
Invited parents (from item above) who actually came to see the principal	1995/96 (N=122)	97.15%	100	34
	2000/2001 (N=111)	96.40%	100	60
At least one parent who visited on their own initiative	1995/96 (N=122)	28.49%	10	100
	2000/2001 (N=112)	39.31%	10	100
Teachers who visited homes	1995/96 (N=122)	9.05%	0	100
	2000/2001 (N=112)	19.19%	0	100

There were no significant changes since the outset of the scheme in principals' perceptions of parents' attitudes regarding their children's education (Table 5.31). As was the case in 1995/96, the vast majority of principals (94.7%) indicated that less than 40% of parents were not interested in their children's academic progress. Similarly, the majority of principals in both years (84.1% in 2000/2001 and 75.6% in 1995/96) estimated that less than 40% of parents had low educational expectations of their children. These findings are consistent with the responses of co-ordinators in 2000/2001, who estimated that, on average, 32.6% of parents in their cluster had low educational expectations of their children (Table 7.29 in Chapter 7).

Table 5.31. Percentages of principals who indicated their perception of the percentage of parents of the children in their school who (a) lack an interest in the educational progress of their children, and (b) who have low educational expectations of their children during the 1995/96 and 2000/2001 school years.

About what percentage of parents of the children in your school lack an interest in the educational progress of their children?					
	<20%	20-40%	41-60%	61-80%	More than 80%
1995/96 (*N*=118)	85 (72.0%)	18 (15.3%)	11 (9.3%)	2 (1.7%)	2 (1.7%)
2000/2001 (*N*=114)	79 (69.3%)	29 (25.4%)	3 (2.6%)	3 (2.6%)	-
About what percentage of parents of the children in your school have low educational expectations of their children?					
	<20%	20-40%	41-60%	61-80%	More than 80%
1995/96 (*N*=119)	60 (50.4%)	30 (25.2%)	19 (16.0%)	7 (5.9%)	3 (2.5%)
2000/2001 (*N*=113)	53 (46.9%)	42 (37.2%)	12 (10.6%)	6 (5.3%)	-

Information was sought on the activities and courses that were available to parents. As Table 5.32 illustrates, there was a substantial increase since the outset of the scheme in the percentage of schools that provided education programmes which were designed to enable parents to assist their children with their schoolwork (97.4% in 1999/2000 vs. 9.0% in 1996/97). It is likely that schools focused on administrative issues (e.g., school planning and defining the role of the co-ordinator) during the first year of the pilot phase of the project. However, it appears that as the scheme evolved, schools and co-ordinators were able to focus more attention and resources on parents.

Table 5.32. Percentage of principals in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 who indicated that they provided education programmes to parents, which were designed to enable them to assist their children with their schoolwork.

School year	**Number % Yes**
1996/97 (*N*=122)	11 (9.0%)
1997/98 (*N*=120)	111 (92.5%)
1998/99 (*N*=116)	99 (85.3%)
1999/2000 (*N*=115)	112 (97.4%)

Table 5.33 outlines the range of educational programmes which were available to parents between 1996/97 and 1999/2000.

Table 5.33. Numbers and percentages of schools in 1995/96, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 that provided education programmes for parents designed to enable them to assist their children with their schoolwork.

	1996/97 (*N*=122)		**1997/98** (*N*=120)		**1998/99** (*N*=116)		**1999/2000** (*N*=112)	
	No. of Schools	% of Schools	No. of Schools	% of Schools	No. of Schools	% of Schools	No. of Schools	% of Schools
English	5	4.1%	30	25.0%	9	7.8%	19	17.0%
Mathematics	2	1.6%	11	9.2%	6	5.2%	7	6.3%
Irish	5	4.1%	27	22.5%	14	12.1%	6	5.4%
Pre-entry Programmes	10	8.2%	54	45.0%	50	43.1%	50	44.6%
Paired reading	*	*	8**	6.7%	44	37.9%	56	50.0%
Computers	*	*	8**	6.7%	64	55.2%	54	48.2%
Other (e.g., Transition programme)	1	0.8%	13	10.8%	11	9.5%	12	10.7%

*Response choice was not available in the 1996/97 questionnaire.
**Categorised as 'other' as response choice was not available in 1997/98 questionnaires.

In 1996/97, less than 5% of schools offered courses designed to help parents assist their children in English, Irish, and Mathematics, and only a minority offered pre-entry programmes or other courses. There was a considerable increase in the following year in the percentage of schools offering English, Irish, and pre-entry programmes. In 1998/99, there was a slight shift in programme content, and schools were more likely to offer courses in paired reading, computers and pre-entry programmes than in English, Irish or Mathematics. In 1999/2000, paired reading programmes, pre-entry programmes, and computer courses remained popular, with approximately 50% of principals indicating that their school offered such programmes. A minority of schools also offered English, Mathematics, and Irish in 1999/2000.

In addition to offering educational programmes for parents, the majority of schools provided some type of extra-curricular course or activity for parents (Table 5.34). Again, there was a substantial increase since the outset of the scheme in the percentage of schools that offered such activities (67.3% 1999/2000 vs. 9.0% in 1996/97).

Table 5.34. Percentage of principals who indicated that they provided some type of extra-curricular course or activity for parents in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

School year	% Yes
1996/97 (*N*=122)	11 (9.0%)
1997/98 (*N*=120)	96 (80.0%)
1998/99 (*N*=116)	68 (58.6%)
1999/2000 (*N*=107)	72 (67.3%)

Table 5.35 illustrates the range of extra-curricular activities offered by schools over the four years.

Table 5.35. Percentages of schools that provided courses / activities for parents in various extra-curricular areas during the 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 school years.

	1996/97 (*N*=122)		**1997/98** (*N*=120)		**1998/99** (*N*=116)		**1999/2000** (*N*=67)	
	No. of Schools	% of Schools	No. of Schools	% of Schools	No. of Schools	% of Schools	No. of Schools	% of Schools
Home management	9	7.4%	12	10.0%	35	30.2%	3	4.5%
Self-development	1	0.8%	19	15.8%	16	13.8%	11	16.4%
Parenting	9	0.8%	33	27.5%	35	30.2%	20	29.9%
Leisure (incl. keep fit)	1	0.8%	12	10.0%	-	-	3	4.5%
Continuing education	2	1.6%	-	-	1	0.9%	-	-
Health Information	*	*	37	30.8%	8	6.9%	6	9.0%
Art & Craft	*	*	16	13.3%	16	13.8%	7	10.5%
Cookery	*	*	5	4.2%	6	5.2%	2	3.0%
First Aid	*	*	-	-	15	12.9%	-	-
Computers	*	*	-	-	-	-	5	7.5%
Other (e.g., gardening, etc.)	1	0.8%	31	25.8%	12	10.5%	10	14.9%

*This option was not included in the response choices in the 1996/97 questionnaire.

In 1996/97, a minority of schools offered courses on topics such as home-management, self-development, and parenting. In the following three years, approximately 15% of schools offered self-development and Art & Craft courses, and parenting courses remained the most popular, with approximately 30% of schools offering such courses each year. There was also some fluctuation in course content over the years. For example, courses addressing health information topics were the

most common in 1997/98 (offered by 30.8% of schools), while in 1998/99, home-management courses were widely held (30.2%). A minority of schools also offered courses in areas such as First Aid, computers, and continuing education between 1996/97 and 1999/2000. That there was a shift in the focus of courses is not surprising, as one would expect schools to avoid repeating topics which had been offered in previous years.

The finding that the vast majority of schools offered both educational courses and extra-curricular activities for parents in the final year of the pilot phase of the project is consistent with the scheme's objective to promote parents' involvement in their children's education. Furthermore, the fact that the content of parental education programmes and extra-curricular courses changed somewhat over the four years suggests that schools and co-ordinators were responsive to the needs of parents when developing and implementing the programmes.

Principals were asked whether parents were involved in various school-related activities during the 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 school years. The data presented in Table 5.36 indicate that there was a considerable increase in parental involvement between 1996/97 and 1997/98. Again, it may be the case that schools focused on laying the groundwork for the scheme during the first year, and once administrative issues were resolved, schools were free to target parents. As Table 5.36 illustrates, fundraising was the most common activity in which parents were involved in 1999/2000 (68.7%), followed by assisting with school plays and concerts (62.6%) and assisting with school outings (62.6%). Parents also helped with a variety of other activities, for example, taking small groups for reading and Mathematics, and providing transport to events. In general, the fact that parents were involved in a range of activities, from educational and administrative activities to supervision, suggests that schools have been successful in increasing parents' involvement in their children's education.

Table 5.36. Percentages of schools where parents were involved with teachers in various school-related activities, during the 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 school years.

Event	**% of Schools**			
	1996/97 (*N*=122)	**1997/98 (*N*=120)**	**1998/99 (*N*=116)**	**1999/2000 (*N*=115)**
Fundraising activities	7.4%*	5.0%*	68.1%	68.7%
Assisting with school plays /concerts	4.1%*	12.4%*	58.6%	62.6%
Assisting with school outings	47.5%	69.1%	69.8%	62.6%
Assisting with sports training	53.3%	58.3%	55.2%	54.8%
Paired reading	16.4%	50.0%	47.4%	47.0%
Assisting with craftwork	8.2%	25.0%	25.9%	28.7%
Assisting with school library	5.8%	29.2%	25.9%	28.7%
Taking small groups for reading	2.4%	13.3%	13.8%	10.4%
Playground supervision	2.4%	8.3%	2.6%	4.3%
Taking small groups for Mathematics	0.8%	5.8%	0.9%	3.5%
After-school activities	17.2%*	20.8%*	-	-
Other (e.g., providing transport to school events, school tours)	7.4%	15.9%	49.1%	30.4%

*Denotes where responses were classified as 'other' because response choice was not available.

5.5. PRINCIPALS' OPINIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF *BREAKING THE CYCLE*

The 1997/98, 1998/99, 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 School Questionnaires sought information on principals' views on the effects of the scheme on their school and on their pupils. Given the economic changes which occurred in Ireland during the pilot phase of the scheme, principals in 2000/2001 were also asked if they felt that the level of disadvantage among families served by their school had changed since 1997. Two-thirds of principals (66.7%) felt that families were slightly less, or much less, disadvantaged in 2000/2001; a quarter said that there was no change, and 9.6% that there was an increase in levels of disadvantage (Table 5.37).

Table 5.37. Number and percentage of principals in 2000/2001 (*N*=114) who indicated the extent to which they felt that, as a consequence of economic growth in Ireland over the past few years, the levels of disadvantage among families served by their school changed since 1997 (when the scheme was introduced).

	Families are much more disadvantaged	Families are slightly more disadvantaged	No difference	Families are slightly less disadvantaged	Families are much less disadvantaged
Number (%)	3 (2.6%)	8 (7.0%)	27 (23.7%)	65 (57.0%)	11 (9.7%)

Principals' explanations for why they thought families were more, or less, disadvantaged are outlined in Table 5.38.

Table 5.38. Number and percentage of principals in 2000/2001 (*N*=117) providing various comments regarding the changes in levels of disadvantage among families served by their schools since 1997.

More Disadvantaged / No difference (negative comment)	**Number %**
No economic growth / Celtic Tiger hasn't reached us	25 (21.4%)
Unemployment rates still high	17 (14.5%)
Families on farming incomes / farming allowances have dropped considerably	10 (8.5%)
Low income families / No change due to inflation	6 (5.1%)
Parents & siblings are employed but positions are seasonal /not permanent /poorly paid	6 (5.1%)
Parents are less available to their children as they are working in part-time jobs.	2 (1.7%)
Disadvantage is due to geographical isolation	2 (1.7%)
High proportion of single parent families / broken or dysfunctional families	2 (1.7%)
Other (e.g., drinks/drugs still prevalent)	31 (26.5%)
Less Disadvantaged (positive comment)	**Number %**
Employment among families (mother, fathers and older siblings) of pupils in the school and community has improved	34 (29.1%)
More income in families (general comment)	21 (17.9%)
Less (educationally) disadvantaged as a result of BTC / children have same opportunity / facilities in school / home visitations	12 (10.3%)
Parents place greater importance on education	10 (8.5%)
Materially families are better off (e.g., more mobile phones / holidays abroad)	4 (3.4%)
Parents in training schemes or college courses	4 (3.4%)
Social welfare payment and children's allowance increased	3 (2.6%)
Other (less disadvantaged)	17 (14.5%)

As can be seen in Table 5.38, 21.4% of principals said that there had been no economic growth in their area, and 14.5% said that unemployment rates were still high. According to one principal:

> There is little evidence of 'Celtic Tiger' in our parish- among targeted families. Inflation, e.g., house prices / sites / labour / essentials has spiralled.

Two principals also reported that there was little change because the disadvantage was due to geographical isolation:

> Disadvantage in the country is totally different to disadvantage in the city…our disadvantage is mainly due to our isolation…it is very difficult for us to get services brought in, i.e., guest speakers…it is also difficult for us to source materials…

A number of principals also felt that families were *more* disadvantaged despite the decrease in unemployment. For example, in the view of six principals (5.1%), although more parents were employed, often the positions were seasonal, temporary or poorly paid. Furthermore, two principals felt that parents were less available to their children as a result of their part-time jobs. As one principal commented:

> There is plenty of work available, there are FAS training courses…on the other hand, there is less time for interaction and involvement with the family and there is greater pressure on the school to provide an education- and cope with 'no homework', etc…

One principal also felt that the widening of the gap between the disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged was a detrimental consequence of the economic growth:

> The small farming communities have not benefited at all from our economic growth. If anything, the divide has widened between those who 'have' and those who 'have not'.

Where principals felt that families were *less* disadvantaged, the most common reason given was that the employment situation had improved (29.1%). For example, one principal commented:

> Unskilled and semi-skilled parents have been able to find part-time work. Parents in general have a more positive outlook regarding their child's chances of securing permanent employment close to home.

Furthermore, 17.9% of principals felt that family income had increased, and three principals pointed to increases in social welfare payments and children's allowance. Principals also noted that parents had an opportunity to participate in training schemes and courses (1.7%). As one principal wrote:

> Access to training courses and work opportunities has instilled a greater sense of self-worth in parents. This impacts positively on child's performance in school.

Notably, 8.5% of principals reported that parents placed greater importance on education. According to one principal:

> Our families are 100% dependant on agriculture. Farm income has dropped significantly so there is little or no change. Attitudes, however, are changing and greater value is being placed on education by the current generation. The community in general is more positive as emigration is no longer the only available option…

Finally, 10.3% attributed the decrease in the levels of disadvantage to *Breaking the Cycle*, for example, noting that children had more opportunities as a result of their participation in the scheme.

An examination of principals' views on the impact of the scheme suggests that, for the most part, the scheme was of benefit to participating schools (Table 5.39). There was a significant increase (χ^2=14.87; *df*=1; *p*<.001) between 1997/98 and 2000/2001 in the percentage of principals who felt the scheme had a very positive impact on the school (41.7% vs. 67.5% respectively). Similarly, there was a significant increase (χ^2=14.29; *df*=1; *p*<.001) in the percentage who reported that participation in the scheme had a very positive effect on teaching practices in the school (29.2% in 1997/98 vs. 54.3% in 2000/2001). The percentage of principals who reported that the scheme had a very positive effect on morale in the school also increased significantly (χ^2=8.13; *df*=1; *p*<.01) in the final year of the pilot phase of the scheme (38.7% in 1997/98 vs. 58.1% in 2000/2001). While a minority were unsure of the effects of the scheme, no principal in 2000/2001 felt that the scheme had a negative, or very negative, effect on the school, on teaching practices, or on morale.

Table 5.39. Numbers and percentages of principals in 1997/98, 1998/99, 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 who indicated that *Breaking the Cycle* had a positive or negative effect on their school, on teaching practices, and on morale in their school.

Effect participating in *Breaking the Cycle* has had on school.					
	Very positive	Positive	Unsure/ None	Negative	Very negative
1997/98 (*N* =120)	50 (41.7%)	65 (54.2%)	5 (4.2%)	-	-
1998/99 (*N*=116)	58 (50.0%)	54 (46.6%)	3 (2.6%)	1 (0.9%)	-
1999/2000 (*N*=112)	64 (57.1%)	45 (40.2%)	3 (2.7%)	-	-
2000/2001 (*N*=117)	79 (67.5%)	34 (29.1%)	4 (3.4%)	-	-
Effect participating in *Breaking the Cycle* has had on teaching practice in school.					
	Very positive	Positive	Unsure/ None	Negative	Very negative
1997/98 (*N* =120)	35 (29.2%)	71 (59.2%)	14 (11.7%)	-	-
1998/99 (*N*=115)	46 (40.0%)	51 (44.3%)	17 (14.8%)	1 (0.9%)	-
1999/2000 (*N*=113)	46 (40.7%)	59 (52.2%)	8 (7.0%)	-	-
2000/2001 (*N*=116)	63 (54.3%)	44 (37.9%)	9 (7.8%)	-	-
Effect participating in *Breaking the Cycle* has had on morale in school.					
	Very positive	Positive	Unsure/ None	Negative	Very negative
1997/98 (*N* =119)	46 (38.7%)	62 (52.1%)	11 (9.2%)	-	-
1998/99 (*N*=115)	52 (45.2%)	49 (42.6%)	13 (11.3%)	1 (0.9%)	-
1999/2000 (*N*=113)	56 (49.6%)	49 (43.4%)	7 (6.2%)	1 (0.9%)	-
2000/2001 (*N*=117)	68 (58.1%)	43 (36.8%)	6 (5.1%)	-	-

Furthermore, principals were significantly less likely in 2000/2001 than in 1997/98 (χ^2=5.65; *df*=1; *p*<.05) to indicate that they were unsure of the scheme's effect on pupils (6.0% vs. 16.7% respectively). In the final year of the pilot phase of the project, 94% of principals agreed that participation in the scheme had benefited marginalised pupils (Table 5.40).

Table 5.40. Numbers and percentages of principals in 1997/98, 1998/99, 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 who believed that marginalised pupils in their school had/had not benefited from *Breaking the Cycle*.

Do you think marginalised pupils in your school have benefited from participating in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme?			
	Yes	**Unsure**	**No**
1997/98 (*N*=120)	99 (82.5%)	20 (16.7%)	1 (0.8%)
1998/99 (*N*=116)	107 (92.2%)	7 (6.0%)	2 (1.7%)
1999/2000 (*N*=114)	107 (93.9%)	6 (5.3%)	1 (0.9%)
2000/2001 (*N*=116)	109 (94.0%)	7 (6.0%)	-

Principals were asked whether pupils had improved academically, *as measured by formal and informal tests*. In a related item, they were asked to indicate whether pupils' achievements had improved, *on the basis of teachers' and their own opinions* (Table 5.41).

As was the case in 1998/99, the majority of principals in 2000/2001 indicated that pupils had improved somewhat, or a lot, as reflected by formal and informal tests (71.4% and 77.2% respectively). Similarly, when asked whether they or their teachers perceived a change in pupils' academic achievements, the majority of principals in both years said that pupils' academic achievements had improved somewhat or a lot (80.0% in 1998/99 and 83.6% in 2000/2001).

Table 5.41. Numbers and percentages of principals in 1998/99 and 2000/2001 who indicated the extent of improvements in pupils academic achievements since the introduction of *Breaking the Cycle*, as measured by formal or informal tests and by principals' and teachers' opinions.

Have the academic achievements of pupils in your school, as measured by formal or informal tests, changed since the introduction of *Breaking the Cycle*?					
	Disimproved a lot	Disimproved somewhat	Unchanged	Improved somewhat	Improved a lot
1998/99 (*N*=112)	-	-	32 28.6%	66 58.9%	14 12.5%
2000/2001 (*N*=114)	1 0.9%	1 0.9%	24 21.1%	73 64.0%	15 13.2%
Have the academic achievements of pupils in your school, on the basis of your own or teacher's opinions, changed since the introduction of *Breaking the Cycle*?					
	Disimproved a lot	Disimproved somewhat	Unchanged	Improved somewhat	Improved a lot
1998/99 (*N*=112)	-	-	23 20.0%	74 64.3%	18 15.7%
2000/2001 (*N*=115)	-	1 0.9%	18 15.5%	81 69.8%	16 13.8%

Principals were asked to indicate the extent of improvements in pupils' social skills since *Breaking the Cycle* was introduced. It appears that involvement in the scheme was of benefit to pupils, both personally and socially, as 93.2% of principals in 2000/2001 felt that pupils' levels of self-esteem had increased somewhat, or a lot, since the introduction of the scheme (Table 5.42). Furthermore, principals were significantly less likely (χ^2=4.12; *df*=1; *p*<.05) in the final year of the scheme to report that pupils' standards of social interaction remained unchanged (25.4% in 1998/99 vs. 13.9% in 2000/2001). Although two principals said that there had been a disimprovement, the vast majority in 2000/2001 (84.4%) indicated that the standards of social interaction among pupils had improved a lot, or somewhat.

Table 5.42. Numbers and percentages of principals in 1998/99 and 2000/01 indicating the extent of change in pupils level of self-esteem and standard of social interaction, since the introduction of *Breaking the Cycle*.

Have levels of self-esteem among your pupils changed since the introduction of *Breaking the Cycle*?					
	Decreased a lot	Decreased somewhat	Unchanged	Increased somewhat	Increased a lot
1998/99 (*N*=114)	-	-	15 13.2%	60 52.6%	39 34.2%
2000/01 (*N*=116)	-	-	8 6.9%	54 46.6%	54 46.6%
Have the standards of social interaction of the pupils in your school changed since the introduction of *Breaking the Cycle*?					
	Disimproved a lot	Disimproved somewhat	Unchanged	Improved somewhat	Improved a lot
1998/99 (*N*=114)	-	-	29 25.4%	45 39.5%	40 35.1%
2000/01 (*N*=115)	1 0.9%	1 0.9%	16 13.9%	54 47.0%	43 37.4%

Principals were asked to estimate the amount of time, in a typical week, that pupils engaged in out-of-school activities. As Table 5.43 illustrates, Senior class pupils spent the most time engaged in out-of-school activities (1 hour and 32 minutes per week), followed by Middle class pupils (1 hour and 22 minutes per week), and Junior class pupils (54 minutes per week).

Table 5.43. Principals' estimates of the amount of class time (in hours) in a typical week that Junior, Middle, and Senior class pupils spent engaging in out-of-school activities / special projects during the 2000/2001 school year.

	Junior (*N*=109)	Middle (*N*=109)	Senior (*N*=109)
Mean	0.95	1.37	1.53
Mode	1.0	1.0	1.0
Minimum – Maximum time	0 - 4	0 – 6	0 - 6

Table 5.44 outlines the types of out-of-school activities that were offered in 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

Table 5.44. Numbers and percentages of schools that organised various out-of-school activities and events for their pupils in 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

Category	% of schools **1998/99** (*N*=112)	% of schools **1999/2000** (*N*=108)
Theatre / cinema	70.5%	67.6%
Sports	57.1%	62.0%
Music	36.6%	42.6%
Outings-historical / cultural / other	35.7%	34.3%
Art-related	17.0%	25.9%
Literary	20.5%	24.1%
Computer	15.2%	15.7%
Outings-Nature	11.6%	13.8%
Dance	16.1%	8.3%
Festivals/ local projects	7.1%	7.4%
Other	17.0%	16.7%

The most popular activities in both years included theatre/cinema trips and sports outings. Attending concerts, or using the funding to pay for music lessons and outings of other kinds such as trips to places of cultural and historical interest were also common, with over one-third of schools indicating that they organised such activities. Approximately a quarter of schools used some of the available funding for art-related and literary activities, and a minority offered events relating to computers and nature outings. Finally, 16.7% of schools organised activities which were classified as 'other', including, for example, German classes, visits to pet shops, and school gardening projects.

In 2000/2001, 58.6% of principals felt pupils derived great benefit from out-of-school activities, while 29.3% indicated they had benefited to a good extent, and 11.2% that they had benefited to some extent. Only one principal felt pupils had not benefited from the out-of-school activities.

In fact, when principals were asked to give reasons why they felt marginalised pupils had or had not benefited from the scheme, the most common response (40.2%) was that pupils had benefited from out-of-school activities (Table 5.45). Over a quarter of principals also felt that the financial benefits and funding for class projects was of benefit (28.2%) and that the extra funding for additional resources and equipment was useful (25.6%). One quarter of principals commented on teachers' increased knowledge of disadvantage and the fact that teachers were more aware of the needs of marginalised pupils, while a minority of principals in 2000/2001 (12.8%) noted that the co-ordinator was a valuable resource for the school. Principals also felt that home-school links were stronger and

that pupils' self-confidence and interest in school had increased. Finally, principals provided a range of reasons which were classified as 'other'. For example:

> The marginalised pupils have been assimilated into the school system. They have gained in confidence and ambition to succeed just as well as the other children.

Table 5.45. Numbers and percentages* of principals in 1997/98 and 2000/2001 who gave various explanations as to why they believed that marginalised pupils had or had not benefited from *Breaking the Cycle.*

Category	**Number % 1997/98** (*N*=120)	**Number % 2000/2001** (*N*=117)
Children benefit from out-of-school activities (music, drama, art and sporting) / experience activities would not have experienced otherwise / broader curriculum	25 20.8%	47 40.2%
Financial benefits / funding for class projects / trips / extra-mural classes (e.g., swimming) / school would not have been able to afford without BTC	59 49.2%	33 28.2%
Extra funding for resources / equipment (e.g., computers) / materials (e.g., books in library, concrete educational materials)	-	30 25.6%
Teachers focused on disadvantaged / aware of needs of marginalised children with specific needs / give more attention to pupils / outside expertise (e.g., speech and drama teachers) beneficial	20 16.7%	29 24.8%
Work of co-ordinator beneficial to teachers, pupils and parents / one-to-one from co-ordinator / co-ordinator is an extra resource for the school	19 15.8%	15 12.8%
Improved co-operation and liaison with parents / children benefit from home visits / parents have a more positive attitude towards school / parents' confidence improved	15 12.5%	11 9.4%
General positive comment	-	10 8.5%
Pupils more self-confident / pupils' self-esteem, social skills and communication skills have improved	14 11.7%	8 6.8%
Pupils more interested in school	-	1.7%
Academic achievements (e.g., literacy) improved	8 6.7%	-
Parents unwilling to co-operate (e.g., suspicious of home visits, don't attend courses)	6 5.0%	-
Other	10 8.3%	35 29.9%

* Percentages do not sum to 100% as some principals provided more than one reason.

Principals were given the opportunity to make general comments about the scheme. Responses were classified into categories based on the kind of comments given (Table 5.46).

Table 5.46. Numbers and percentages of principals in 2000/2001 expressing various general comments on the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme.

Category	**2000/2001 Number %* (*N*=95)**
General (unspecific) positive comment (e.g., it is an excellent scheme, an advantage to our school)	52 54.7%
Extra funds beneficial (unspecific)	22 23.2%
Extra equipment / materials beneficial	22 23.2%
Co-ordinator (positive comment): co-ordinator is an asset for planning / organising projects, supportive, has time and skill to deal with problems, co-ordinator does remedial teaching	21 22.1%
Out-of-school activities beneficial / experience children would otherwise never have / broader curriculum	18 18.9%
Problems with pupil-teacher ratio / multi-grade teaching / should have reduced pupil-teacher ratios initiatives	15 15.8%
Co-ordinator (negative comment): role too varied / home visits difficult in rural community / should spend more time in each school / workload is too excessive	14 14.7%
Increase in workload / administration / organisation of scheme time-consuming (e.g., filling in questionnaire) for teachers and principals / no extra time allocated to principals for administrative duties / more time needed to consult with co-ordinator	12 12.6%
More co-operation with schools in cluster (than before scheme)	12 12.6%
Concern over the continuation of the scheme	9 9.5%
Problems with co-ordinator appointment / loss or co-ordinator / no co-ordinator appointed or newly appointed to position	9 9.5%
Negative comment regarding funding (e.g., Lack of clarity on how to spend funds / money needs to be increased)	3 3.2%
Parental involvement in school increased / parent friendly atmosphere / less mistrust among parents / benefited targeted families	2 2.1%
Out-of-school activities disruptive to class day / less teaching time due to visiting teachers / projects	3 3.2%
More inservice needed	3 3.2%
Other	49 51.6%

* Percentages do not sum to 100% as some principals provided more than one reason.

Over half of principals in 2000/2001 made a general positive comment. For example:

> To my mind the scheme has been and is an outstanding success in that it fairly levels the playing pitch giving marginalised pupils the same chance as everyone else. The scheme is properly administered, well-organised, and we are grateful to be a part of it.

> *Breaking the Cycle* is without a doubt the best thing that has happened to our school. Parents, teachers and children have all benefited greatly from the scheme. The school has become an open, friendly environment and parents are in regular contact with teaching staff. All of this would not be possible without the scheme and in particular the co-ordinator who has become an essential and popular element of school and community.

Principals also made positive comments regarding the additional funding (23.2%), extra materials and equipment (23.2%), out-of-school activities (18.9%), and increased parental involvement (2.1%). Furthermore, 22.1% made a positive comment regarding the co-ordinator, for example writing that the co-ordinator was an asset in terms of planning and organising projects. A further 18.9% felt that the scheme had provided pupils with experiences they would never have had otherwise, and 12.6% pointed to increased co-operation between schools, and commented on how 'clustering' had helped schools to overcome their geographical isolation. For example:

> …The cluster works effectively- ideas are shared and problems which are common are easier to resolve. 'Good practice' in one school is relayed by the co-ordinator to the other schools in the cluster.

> *Breaking the Cycle* has afforded isolated teachers chances to meet with others in the scheme, discuss problems, solutions, etc…Social interaction very good when children meet with children from other schools in the cluster…

> *Breaking the Cycle* helped to abolish the <u>isolation</u> which we felt, as a small…school. 'Clustering' of schools was a wonderful idea. In rural Ireland, we felt so remote and removed even from our closest neighbours…

On the other hand, many principals took the opportunity to voice their concerns about various aspects of the scheme. Specifically, 14.7% made a negative comment in relation to co-ordinators, noting, for example, that their role was too varied or that their workload excessive. Furthermore, 9.5% reported problems relating to the appointment or loss of a co-ordinator, which is not surprising given that the rate of turnover among co-ordinators was very high (Table 7.1).

Although the majority of principals felt that out-of-school activities were beneficial, three commented that they were disruptive and reduced teaching time:

> The scheme…has provided a constant stream of disruption with all the various activities.

Twelve principals (12.6%) also noted that the additional administrative work created problems. However, a number felt that the benefits of the scheme were worth the additional work:

> The *Breaking the Cycle* scheme has meant a lot of extra work for the teachers but it has also given our rural children a chance to see, do and hear things that town children have always done…

Furthermore, about one in six principals (15.8%) cited problems with pupil-teacher ratios and multi-grade classes and proposed that class size reduction initiatives should be implemented in rural schools. Three principals (3.2%) also suggested that more inservice would be beneficial. As one principal noted:

…surely a good teacher is the single most influential resource in a *Breaking the Cycle* school.

According to another principal:

> For four years of this scheme our school struggled with high class numbers of over 30 per room, only this year did we get our fourth teacher and this has made a huge difference to staff morale and the amount of attention we are able to give individual pupils. As participants in the scheme we have benefited greatly from the additional funding and resources we have received but this could never be a substitute for lower numbers in classes. I have also been extremely disappointed that there have not been opportunities for teachers to enhance their skills and develop new skills through the provision of inservice training.

Finally, about one in ten principals (9.5%) was concerned about the continuation of the scheme. These concerns were reflected in one principal's comment:

> Each year we write our comments on this form. As schools we would like some feedback on what the rest of the country are experiencing. Does it matter what we write? Who sees these forms? Will what we say be taken on board? Will the positive comments be taken and the negative ignored? …it is very frustrating to find the questions asked in exactly the same way. 90% of questions are irrelevant. *BTC* in its present form is going nowhere, unless the real issues are addressed:
>
> 1.Time out for teaching principals to meet with parents to hear their issues and to establish good school/communication. Parents are very reluctant to discuss matters with teachers/principals as they are aware of the heavy workload.
>
> 2. Reduction in pupil-teacher ratio to allow the real disadvantaged children adequate contact with teacher. This year I have 28 pupils in 5th and 6th class. I have a profoundly deaf child and 4 children with severe remedial needs.
>
> 3. A co-ordinator appointed on a permanent basis to all schools in BTC scheme would go a long way to addressing the above problem.
>
> 4. Secretaries and care-takers in our school to deal with day-to-day issues and allow me as teacher to teach my class - not cleaning etc.. I could go on - 20% of my time is taken up each day doing emergency repairs….

For the most part, principals made positive comments regarding the effects of the scheme, and the majority felt that participation had had a positive impact on the school in general, on morale and teaching practices, and on marginalised pupils. However, a review of principals' comments suggests that a number of outstanding concerns remain which need to be addressed.

5.6. CONCLUSION

To ascertain whether the scheme had an impact on pupils and schools in a range of areas of school life, principals were asked to complete School Questionnaires in each of the five years of the scheme. The response rate in each year was high (99.2%, 97.6%, 95.1%, 94.3% and 98.3% in 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001, respectively). The questionnaires sought information on a range of areas, including personnel and school resources, enrolment and attendance, psychological assessment and discipline rates, home-school links, and principals' perceptions of the scheme.

While the mean enrolment in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools significantly decreased between 1995 and 2000 (59.58 pupils vs. 50.64 pupils, respectively), change in the mean number of class teachers was not significant (2.78 teachers vs. 2.58 teachers, respectively). However, it appears that schools' access to a range of other teaching personnel, including remedial teachers and various specialized teachers (e.g., Arts and Crafts instructors) increased in 1999/2000.

Almost half of principals in 2000/2001 were experiencing difficulties in filling teaching posts. The isolated location of the school and practical problems, such as difficulties in finding accommodation, were perceived to deter teachers from taking up posts in rural schools. Over one-third of principals also referred to a shortage of qualified teachers. Consideration might be given to making teaching posts in rural schools more attractive, for example by offering financial or other incentives.

Principals were asked about their own roles and responsibilities. Overall, principals in multiple-teacher schools spent an average of 37.1 hours and principals in single-teacher schools a mean of 32 hours per week on various teaching, administrative and instructional leadership activities[7]. For the most part, the percentage of time that principals allocated to the range of activities in a typical week had not changed since the beginning of the scheme. There was, however, a significant increase in the time principals spent consulting with specialist teachers, which is not surprising given that schools had increased access to remedial and other specialised teachers in 1999/2000.

In terms of the physical attributes of schools, there was little change in the percentage of schools that had access to a range of outdoor facilities. As was the case in 1995/96, the majority of schools in 2000/2001 had access to facilities such as paved and grass play areas, ball courts and shelters. There was some evidence of improvement to schools' indoor facilities, as a higher percentage of principals in 2000/2001 than in 1995/96 indicated that their school had various rooms, including a remedial teacher's room, a staff room, and an administrative office. The fact that the vast majority of the rooms had a shared function suggests that schools were attempting to maximize the use of available space. However, lack of co-ordinator accommodation was a concern raised by a number of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (see Chapter 7).

[7] Instructional leadership activities in single-teacher schools likely entailed working with the cluster co-ordinator and specialist visiting teachers.

The additional funding available under the scheme helped schools to acquire a range of equipment and materials. Specifically, compared to 1995/96, schools in 2000/2001 were significantly more likely to have access to equipment such as stereo-systems, televisions, VCRs, and printers. There was also an increase in the mean number of items of equipment available in schools in 2000/2001. Given these findings, it is not surprising that principals were significantly more likely in 2000/2001 than in 1995/96 to say that teaching in the main curriculum areas was not at all affected by an inadequacy of teaching equipment. A similar picture emerged when principals were asked whether teaching in a variety of areas was affected by an inadequacy of books. However, the data suggest that additional resources should perhaps be targeted at Irish, Music, P.E., Environmental Studies and Arts, as a considerable percentage of principals in 2000/2001 felt that teaching in these curriculum areas continued to be affected by a shortage of equipment and books. There was also a significant increase since the outset of the scheme in the percentage of schools that had access to various items of computer hardware and software. This was due to the introduction of the Schools I.T. 2000 initiative.

In addition to examining schools' resources, information was also sought on various pupil-centred issues. The finding that there was a significant increase between 1995/96 and 1999/2000 in the percentage of pupils who had ever been psychologically assessed is probably due to the establishment in 1999 of the National Educational Psychological Service. Despite the increase in the percentage of pupils assessed, however, there was still a discrepancy between the percentage referred and the percentage who were actually assessed in 1998/99. For example, while 3.2% of the total class population was referred for assessment in 1998/99, only 2.1% of pupils were actually assessed during that year. The most common reason for non-assessment was that pupils were still on a waiting list, and several principals raised the issue of inadequate psychological support services in their responses to open-ended items, for example noting that their funding was being spent on private psychological assessments. These findings suggest that further consideration should be given to strategies to increase the availability of psychological assessment services in participating schools.

Boys were significantly more likely than girls to be referred for psychological assessment in 1995/96, 1996/97, 1997/98 and 1998/99. Furthermore, in each of the four years, a significantly higher number of boys than girls were assessed. The most common reason for referral among both boys and girls was poor academic performance or progress, followed by behavioural problems.

When the discipline rates among pupils in participating schools were examined, there appeared to be little change in the prevalence of various types of misbehavior during the life of the scheme. Furthermore, there was little difference between 1995/96 and 1999/2000 in the percentage of pupils for whom disciplinary procedures had been invoked. The most common types of misbehavior included classroom disturbance, bullying of other pupils, late arrival at school, and absenteeism. However, the incidence of misbehavior was low. Similarly, the number of pupils who received 3-day or 10-day suspensions was small in both 1995/96 and 1999/2000.

It appears that the scheme had little impact on pupils' attendance, as the average attendance rate remained stable at approximately 91.9%. However, while one might have expected participation in the scheme to have positively impacted on pupils' attendance, it should be noted that the attendance rate in 1995/96 was already high (and comparable with the daily attendance rates among all Dublin city schools). Unfortunately, there are no comparable figures for a national sample of pupils. Such data would be informative from a general standpoint, particularly since research in the area has generally demonstrated an association between poor attendance and low achievement; it would also allow a comparison of attendance rates, for example, between schools designated as disadvantaged and non-designated schools.

Since a reliance on annual percentage attendance rates as indicators of attendance levels might mask the fact that attendance problems are particularly significant for some families, the percentage of chronic low attenders was also examined. Although there was little change in the mean number of chronic low attenders in each of the last three quarters of the school year, there was a significant decrease since the introduction of the scheme in the percentage of chronic low attenders during the first quarter of the school year. Overall, the numbers of pupils with poor attendance records was very small. Furthermore, only eleven pupils were referred to the SAO in 2000/2001, and no pupils had legal proceedings instituted against them for poor attendance. Taken together, the findings suggest that attendance was not a major problem in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools. To significantly improve attendance rates between 1995/96 and 2000/2001, pupils would have had to exceed the national attendance rates.

However, the fact that over a quarter of principals felt that parents had a bearing on pupils' non-attendance suggests that strategies to increase parents' awareness of the importance of regular attendance might be useful in maintaining and perhaps improving attendance rates.

For the most part, it appears that the scheme was successful in its objective of promoting parental involvement in their children's education. Although only a small minority of schools provided education programmes and extra-curricular courses for parents in the first year of the scheme (i.e., in 1996/97), by 1999/2000, the vast majority of schools offered such courses and activities. The fact that the content of the courses changed over the life of the scheme also suggests that schools were responsive to parents' needs each year. Furthermore, towards the end of the scheme, parents were significantly more likely to visit the school on their own initiative than was the case at the beginning of the scheme. Two-thirds of principals in 2000/2001 indicated that less than 20% of parents lacked an interest in their children's academic progress and the vast majority of principals estimated that less than 40% of parents had low educational expectations for their children.

Principals in 2000/2001 were asked whether, as a result of the economic growth in Ireland, levels of disadvantage among families served by their school had changed since 1997. A majority (66.7%) felt that families were slightly less, or much less, disadvantaged. Families were considered less disadvantaged because parents were more likely to be working or studying, family income had

increased, and families were better off materially. However, almost a quarter of principals commented that there had been no economic growth or change in unemployment levels in the area, and others noted that disadvantage was due to geographical isolation and therefore remained unaffected by economic growth. However, several principals felt that, despite the lack of economic growth, parents placed a greater emphasis on their children's education, and 10.3% commented that children were less disadvantaged as a result of *Breaking the Cycle*.

In addition to fostering strong home-school links, the majority of principals felt that the scheme had a positive effect on the school in general, and on morale and teaching practices within the school. Furthermore, 94% of principals indicated that involvement in the scheme had positively impacted on marginalised pupils. In 2000/2001, over 75% of principals said that pupils' academic achievements had improved, based on test results and staff opinion, and all but one principal reported an improvement in pupils' self-esteem and standards of social interaction since the introduction of *Breaking the Cycle.*

Principals' reports on the effects of out-of-school activities were also very positive, with over half indicating that pupils had derived great benefit from the activities. In fact, when principals were asked to explain why they felt pupils had, or had not, benefited as a result of participating in the scheme, the most common response was that pupils had been given an opportunity to experience activities which would not have been possible otherwise. Principals also indicated that the additional resources and materials, the support of the co-ordinator, and the increased awareness of disadvantage among teachers contributed to the scheme's success.

For the most part, the findings point to a positive impact in several areas of school life as a result of participation in the scheme. However, there appear to be some areas of school life where further attention is required. Particular concerns raised by principals related to inadequate psychological assessment services, difficulties in recruiting teaching staff, and problems with the co-ordinator's post and workload. It is likely that addressing some of these issues would serve to further enhance the beneficial effects of the scheme.

6. THE IMPACT OF THE SCHEME ON TEACHERS

All class teachers in participating schools were asked to complete questionnaires in 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000. Response rates for each year were 96.2%, 91.9%, 88.5% and 90.6%, respectively. While the questionnaire content varied from year to year, certain core items were included each year. Specifically, information was sought on teachers' background and work, their perceptions of their pupils' work and background, and their views on the scheme.

Data from the 1996/97 questionnaire were presented in the report *The Breaking the Cycle Scheme in Rural Schools: A Report for 1996-1997* (Eivers & Weir, 1998), and teachers' perceptions of the scheme in 1997, 1998, and 1999 were examined in the *Interim Report on the Evaluation of the Breaking the Cycle Scheme in Rural Schools* (Weir & Ryan, 2000). As the sheer abundance of information collected over the four years rendered a detailed analysis of every questionnaire item from each year impractical, only a selection of data from the teacher questionnaires is examined in this report. Particular emphasis is placed on the data from the 1996/97 questionnaire, which described teachers' views at the outset of the scheme, and the 1999/2000 questionnaire, which provided insights into teachers' perceptions towards the end of the five-year pilot project. It was hoped that a comparison of the 1996/97 baseline data and the data from the 1999/2000 questionnaire would reveal whether any significant shifts in teachers' attitudes and teaching practices had occurred since the outset of the scheme.

One of the key components of the scheme was targeted incareer development programmes to support teachers in offsetting the educational effects of disadvantage. It was expected that such training would enhance teachers' and principals' understanding of the nature of disadvantage and would enable them to respond effectively to the needs of disadvantaged children. A brief overview and description of the incareer development programmes made available to staff in participating schools is provided in Section 6.1. Section 6.2 describes teachers' background while Section 6.3 examines teachers' working practices. In section 6.4 teachers' perceptions of pupils' background and attitudes are examined, and finally, Section 6.5 looks at teachers' opinions and experiences of *Breaking the Cycle.*

6.1 INCAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES FOR *BREAKING THE CYCLE*

Incareer development courses were organised for principals and teachers at national level by the *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator and at local level by the cluster co-ordinators. At national level, staffs (principals, teachers and co-ordinators) attended a 2-day or 3-day course on project development (i.e., school planning and implementation of the scheme) and professional development in the first year of the scheme (1996/97). This introductory course covered topics such as partnership, professionalism, school planning and evaluation. There were also modules on various teaching practices (e.g.,

individual versus group instruction) and understanding educational disadvantage. The needs of marginalised pupils and how to respond to them were considered.

The following year (1997/98), teachers in each cluster attended a 1-day module on developing the teaching and learning environment. The focus of this session was on improving classroom management and teaching practices. In the third year of the scheme (1998/99), a 2-day course on project development and remediation, designed to help in the identification of the learning needs of individual pupils and appropriate methods to address them, was organised for principals. Finally, in the last two years of the scheme (i.e., 1999/2000 and 2000/2001), one day per year was allocated to School Development Planning, which was organised at local level by the School Development Planning team.

In 1997/98, 1998/99, and 1999/2000 teachers were asked to describe the staff development courses attended, at local and national level, as a result of participating in *Breaking the Cycle*. This item was excluded from analysis, however, as many of the responses were not amenable to interpretation. For example, a considerable number of teachers did not specify the content of courses at all (e.g., by saying 'a *Breaking the Cycle* course') or gave irrelevant details such as the location, duration and date of course. Further, the fact that the courses varied so widely between schools in 1999/2000 suggests that teachers listed courses which were not offered as part of the scheme. Nevertheless, it appears that teachers attended a wide range of development courses on topics such as computers, Mathematics, English, learning difficulties and remedial education, discipline and multi-class management, art and craft, stress management, personal development and behaviour modification. Schools also held health-related development courses (e.g., stress management, drugs awareness, and first aid), self-development courses (e.g., the Enneagram) and a course on how to develop pupils' self-esteem.

It is worth noting that the final two years of the scheme (1999/2000 and 2000/2001) coincided with the introduction of the revised primary school curriculum. To facilitate the implementation of the new curriculum, all school staff were required to attend six days of incareer development in 1999/2000 and 2000/2001. In many respects, the aims of the new curriculum complement the objectives of the scheme. For example, the new curriculum emphasises child-centred teaching approaches, promotes high expectations in achievement, and encourages schools to involve parents, the community and others in school planning (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999). As one teacher commented:

> I found we (participants in *Breaking the Cycle* scheme) have one advantage over non-participants in light of new curriculum- during inservice our new curriculum, planning and organising, etc was just a repeat of *Breaking the Cycle* inservice. Non-participants had a lot more queries and certain reservations about taking aspects of new curriculum on board whereas we felt we have already been doing this in *Breaking the Cycle*. So obviously unknown to ourselves we have been moulded and conditioned and have embraced a certain change…

6.2 TEACHERS' BACKGROUND

Teachers were asked to supply some background information about themselves and their teaching careers. The data indicate that the teaching staff in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools were overwhelmingly female. As shown in Table 6.1, only about one-quarter of teachers in each year were male.

Table 6.1. Numbers and percentages of teachers in *Breaking the Cycle* schools, by gender in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

	Females	Males
1996/97	241 (77.5%)	69 (22.5%)
1997/98	237 (74.1%)	83 (25.9%)
1998/99	228 (80.0%)	58 (20.0%)
1999/2000	225 (78.9%)	60 (21.1%)

There was also a striking gender difference in the percentage of males and female teachers who were principals (Table 6.2). Of the 60 male teachers in 1999/2000, 37 (61.7%) were principals. In contrast, only 55 of the 225 female teachers (24.4%) who responded to questionnaires in 1999/2000 were principals. A similar pattern of findings was evident in 1996/97, 1997/98 and 1998/99.

Table 6.2. Of the male and female teachers in Table 6.1, the percentage who indicated that they were the principal teacher in the school.

	Females	Males
1996/97	66 (27.4%)	35 (50.7%)
1997/98	53 (22.4%)	42 (50.6%)
1998/99	66 (29.0%)	38 (65.5%)
1999/2000	55 (24.4%)	37 (61.7%)

Teachers were asked whether their positions were full-time or temporary/substitute. As was the case in 1996/97, the vast majority (95.8%) in 1999/2000 were full-time (Table 6.3).

Table 6.3. Numbers and percentages of teachers in *Breaking the Cycle* schools who described their positions as full-time or temporary/substitute in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

	Full-time	Temporary
1996/97 (*n*=307)	294 (95.8%)	13 (4.2%)
1997/98 (*n*=285)	274 (96.1%)	11 (3.9%)
1998/99 (*n*=276)	263 (96.3%)	13 (3.7%)
1999/2000 (*n*=288)	276 (95.8%)	12 (4.2%)

Furthermore, most teachers had considerable teaching experience: on average, 18.4 years (Table 6.4). However, there was considerable variation among teachers, with eight teachers in 1999/2000, for example, indicating that they had been teaching for one year, and two indicating that they had 42 years experience.

Table 6.4. Mean number of years teaching experience of teachers* in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

	Years teaching overall			
	Mean	Mode	Median	Range
1996/97 (*n*=310)	19.50	7	18	46
1997/98 (*n*=111*)	18.40	11	16	50
1998/99 (*n*=121*)	17.20	1**	14	65
1999/2000 (*n*=107*)	18.45	10	18	41

*Teachers who completed the questionnaire in previous years did not respond to this item.
**Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown.

Teachers were asked to indicate the number of pupils they taught at the time of completing the questionnaire (Table 6.5).

Table 6.5. Mean number of pupils taught by teachers in the 1995/96, 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 school years.

	Number of pupils taught			
	Mean	Mode	Median	Range
1995/96 (*n*=264)	22.85	21*	23	35
1996/97 (*n*=310)	21.77	21	22	37
1997/98 (*n*=282)	21.45	24	21.5	31
1998/99 (*n*=282)	20.74	24	21	55
1999/2000 (*n*=287)	19.79	22	20	37

There was a significant decrease (t=4.07; df=595; p<.001) between 1995/96 and 1999/2000 in the mean number of pupils taught by teachers (22.85 vs. 19.79 pupils, respectively), which is not surprising given that the mean enrolment in rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools dropped significantly since the outset of the scheme (see Table 5.14 in Chapter 5). The finding that teachers taught, on average, 19.79 pupils in 1999/2000 is of some interest as 15 principals (15.8%) commented that the high pupil-teacher ratios were problematic in their schools. However, there was wide variation between teachers; for example, two teachers taught only two pupils while one taught 39. However, the most common pupil-teacher ratio in 1999/2000 was 22:1.

Principals raised concerns relating to multi-grade teaching in their questionnaire responses. As Table 6.6 shows, all but six teachers taught multi-grade classes. Over one-third of teachers reported teaching pupils in two or four class levels, while a quarter taught three class levels and two teachers taught six class levels. Although multi-grade classes pose an extra challenge for teachers, there are also some benefits to such classes, as heterogeneous grouping has been shown to promote cognitive growth and decrease antisocial behaviour (Gaustad, 1997). Furthermore, having a range of ages and abilities in the classroom may discourage age-graded expectations and encourages teachers to focus on pupils' individual learning needs (Gaustad, 1997).

Table 6.6. Number of teachers who reported teaching pupils at one class level only, or more than one class level in 1999/2000 (*N*=288).

Number of classes	**Number of teachers**
One class only	*N*=6
Two classes	*N*=101
Three classes	*N*=77
Four classes	*N*=95
Five classes	*N*=7
Six classes	*N*=2

6.3. TEACHERS' WORK

A section of the questionnaire was designed to elicit information about teachers' working practices. Items on the amount of time teachers devoted to each curriculum area, their grouping practices, and their teaching methods were included. Information on their approach to learning (e.g., whether teachers accepted responsibility for their pupils' performance) and their homework assignment practices was also sought.

Teachers in 1999/2000 reported spending the most time per week on English, followed by Mathematics and Irish (Table 6.7). Although English time increased significantly between 1996/97 and 1998/99 (t=2.71; df=591; p<.01), it decreased again in 1999/2000 (t=2.08; df=566; p<.05). Thus, the time that teachers allocated to English in 1999/2000 was comparable to the time spent in 1996/97 (5.08 vs. 5.04 hours per week, respectively). There was a significant decrease in 1999/2000 in the mean amount of time spent on Mathematics (t=1.99; df=592; p<.05) and Irish (t=3.65; df=593; p<.05). However, this did not seem to impact on pupils' achievement (see Chapter 3). In contrast, there was a significant increase (t=3.81; df=592; p<.001) in 1999/2000 in the mean time that teachers spent on Social and Environmental studies. As was the case in 1996/97, teachers in 1999/2000 spent approximately 1.5 hours on Arts and Crafts, 1 hour on P.E., and 1.1 hours on Music.

Table 6.7. Mean number of hours per week that teachers reported spending on each of seven curriculum areas in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

	1996/97 (*N*=310)	**1997/98** (*N*=282)	**1998/99** (*N*=283)	**1999/2000** (*N*=285)	**Yearly Mean**
Irish	4.97	4.97	4.91	4.59	**4.86**
English	5.04	5.27	5.32	5.08	**5.18**
Mathematics	4.89	4.96	4.92	4.69	**4.87**
Environmental Studies	1.73	1.85	2.00	2.05	**1.91**
Art and Craft	1.48	1.52	1.49	1.51	**1.50**
P.E.	0.95	1.03	1.06	1.01	**1.01**
Music	1.04	1.06	1.13	1.10	**1.08**

To assist teachers in implementing the revised curriculum, a framework which suggested minimum times for each curriculum area in 1st to 6th classes was outlined in the Primary School Curriculum Introduction (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999). Table 6.8 presents the suggested time framework for 1st and 6th classes, along with the times that 1st to 6th class teachers in *Breaking the Cycle* schools reported spending on each of seven curriculum areas in 1999/2000.

Table 6.8. Suggested minimum weekly time framework (1st to 6th class teachers), as reported in the Primary School Curriculum, and actual time framework of 1st to 6th class teachers* in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 1999/2000.

Subject	**Recommended time (in hours) (1999)**	**Recommended % of time (1999)**	**Time (in hours) *BTC* schools 1999/2000 (*N*=265)**	**% of time *BTC* schools 1999/2000 (*N*=265)**
English	4.0	20.0%**	5.1	25.1%
Irish	3.5	17.5%**	4.7	23.2%
Mathematics	3.0	15.0%	4.8	23.5%
Social and Environmental studies	3.0	15.0%	2.1	10.4%
Arts Education (includes Arts & Crafts, and Music)	3.0	15.0%	2.6	12.8%
P.E.	1.0	5.0%	1.0	5.0%
Discretionary time	2.0	10.0%***	-	-
Social, personal and health education	0.5	2.5%	****	****
TOTAL	**20.0**	**100%**	**20.3**	**100%**

*Although teachers who taught *only* Junior and Senior Infants were omitted from the analysis, it was not possible to omit all Junior and Senior Infant teachers since most teachers taught multi-grade classes (e.g., JI, SI *and* 1st class).

**The primary school curriculum 2000/2001 distinguishes between schools where the principal medium of instruction is English versus Irish. They suggested allocating 4 hours (20% of total instructional time) to the first language (in the majority of *BTC* schools this would be English), and 3.5 hours (17.5%) to the second language (in a minority of *BTC* schools would be Irish).

***Discretionary time is extra time which teachers can allocate to any of the six curriculum areas, at their or the school's discretion.

****Option not offered in teacher questionnaire.

It was suggested in the revised curriculum that, after accounting for breaks, assemblies and religious education, teachers should spend, on average, 20 hours per week (or four hours per day) on the other curriculum areas (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999). It appears that the total time that 1st to 6th class *Breaking the Cycle* teachers spent on the various subject areas was close to the recommended time (20.3 hours).

Although there was a significant decrease in 1999/2000 in the mean amount of time that *Breaking the Cycle* teachers spent on Mathematics, the time allocated to this subject was still well above the suggested minimum time (e.g., 4.8 hours vs. the recommended time of 3 hours per week). Similarly, while the revised primary school curriculum recommends spending 4 hours per week on English, *Breaking the Cycle* teachers spent, on average, 5.1 hours per week on this subject area in 1999/2000.

Teachers also spent more than the recommended time on Irish (4.7 hours vs. the recommended time of 3.5 hours). In contrast, teachers spent less than the recommended time on Social and Environmental studies. There were only minor differences between the recommended time and the actual time *Breaking the Cycle* teachers devoted to Arts Education and P.E.

Teachers were asked to indicate the percentage of Irish, English and Mathematics class time they devoted to whole class, small group, and individual teaching. In some cases, teachers either failed to respond to the item or provided percentages for each of whole class, small group, and individual children which did not sum to 100%[1]. For the purpose of analysis, non-responses and responses that reached a total less than 80% or greater than 105% were ignored. The results are presented in Table 6.9.

Table 6.9. Mean percentage of time that class teachers reported spending on whole class, small group, and individual instruction in Irish, English and Mathematics in 1996/97 and 1999/2000.

	Whole class		**Small group**		**Individual child**	
Subject area	**1996/97**	**1999/2000**	**1996/97**	**1999/2000**	**1996/97**	**1999/2000**
Irish	73.73	69.45*	16.67	19.97	9.35	10.45
English	60.56	57.84	22.14	24.88	16.27	17.04
Maths	58.02	54.45	22.22	26.24	19.32	19.13

**t*-test revealed a significant difference ($p<.05$) between 1996/97 and 1999/2000 percentages.

In both 1996/97 and 1999/2000, Irish was the curriculum area in which whole class teaching was the most likely. In both years, approximately 70% of Irish time was spent on whole class teaching. These results are consistent with a study of the teaching of Irish at 6th class level in 20 schools in Ireland (Harris & Murtagh, 1999), which found that the largest percentage of lesson time (80.9%) was spent on whole class teaching. However, in 1999/2000, there was a significant decrease

[1] It is likely that teachers found this item difficult to complete because of the multi-grade structure of their classrooms.

(t=1.99; df=552; p<.05) in the time that teachers spent instructing the whole class (73.73% in 1996/97 vs. 69.45% in 1999/2000), and a slight (although not significant) increase in the time teachers spent on small group and individual instruction in Irish. This finding is positive in light of Harris and Murtagh's (1999) recommendation:

> Given the general agreement about the value of small group work in a communicative context…the long term goal should be to evolve towards at least an increase in the proportion of small group tasks and activities in the Irish lesson (p.264).

In contrast, in 1999/2000, teachers spent approximately half of English and Mathematics time engaged in whole class teaching (57.84% and 54.45%, respectively). Small group work occupied approximately 25% of English and Mathematics time, while less than 20% of class time was devoted to individual pupil instruction. The finding that teachers spent approximately a quarter of English and Mathematics time on small group instruction in 1999/2000 should be considered in light of the research on within-class grouping, which suggests that the practice of dividing pupils into groups and instructing them separately has a positive impact on their achievement (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). Small group work may be particularly beneficial for at-risk pupils, as they receive more immediate attention and feedback from teachers when working in small groups (Edmonton Public Schools & University of Alberta, 2001). Additional benefits of group work were noted in the Primary School Curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999):

> Working collaboratively provides learning opportunities that have particular advantages… Collaborative work exposes children to the individual perceptions that others may have of a problem or situation. These will reflect the different personalities and particular abilities of other members of the group and make for an interactive exchange that will help broaden and deepen individual children's understanding. Moreover, the experience of collaborative learning facilitates the child's social and personal development… (p.17).

In a related question, teachers were asked how they organised their small group teaching. The majority of teachers in both 1996/97 and 1999/2000 (81.7% and 80.1%, respectively) indicated that they kept pupils in small groups until they had mastered a particular skill or learned the content (Table 6.10).

Table 6.10. Numbers and percentages of teachers who indicated that their pupils did or did not stay in small groups until a particular skill was mastered or content learned in 1996/97 and 1999/2000.

	Yes	No
1996/97	170 (81.7%)	38 (18.3%)
1999/2000	197 (80.1%)	49 (19.9%)

*Percentages for 1996/97 differ from those reported in *The Breaking the Cycle Scheme in Rural Schools: A Report for 1996-1997*, as non-responses were not included in this analysis.

Since the dissolution of groups once pupils have mastered the skill or objective has been identified as an effective teaching practice, teachers were asked how often they kept pupils in the same group for small group work. A majority of teachers in both years reported that they *sometimes* did

(Table 6.11). There was a significant decrease (χ^2=3.93; *df*=1; *p*<.05) between 1996/97 and 1999/2000 in the percentage of teachers who *always* kept their pupils in the same group.

Table 6.11. Numbers and percentages of teachers who reported that they always, sometimes, or never kept their pupils in the same group during small group teaching in 1996/97 and 1999/2000.

If you divide your class into small groups, do the same pupils stay in the same group whenever there is group teaching?			
	Always	Sometimes	Never
1996/97 (*n*=211)	32 (15.2%)	168 (79.6%)	11 (5.2%)
1999/2000 (*n*=250)	22 (8.8%)	220 (88.0%)	8 (3.2%)

*Percentages for 1996/97 differ from those reported in *The Breaking the Cycle Scheme in Rural Schools: A Report for 1996-1997*, as non-responses were not included in this analysis.

To further assess the impact of participation in the scheme on teachers' practices, teachers were asked a series of items about their teaching methods. Given that clarity of purpose has been identified as a feature of effective teaching (Kellaghan, 1994), teachers were asked whether, at the beginning of the lesson, they set out for the class what they hoped to teach. A significantly higher percentage of teachers in 1999/2000 than in 1996/97 (χ^2=4.85; *df*=1; *p*<.01) reported that they sometimes, or always, made it clear to pupils what was to be learned prior to the lesson (89.6% and 94.8% respectively) (Table 6.12).

Table 6.12. Numbers and percentages of teachers in 1996/97 and 1999/2000 who indicated that, at the beginning of a lesson, they never, rarely, sometimes, or always set out for the class what they hoped to teach.

At the beginning of a lesson, do you set out for the class what you hope to teach?				
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
1996/97 (*n*=307)	4 (1.3%)	25 (8.1%)	183 (59.0%)	95 (30.6%)
1999/2000 (*n*=289)	1 (0.3%)	14 (4.8%)	172 (59.5%)	102 (35.3%)

Effective teachers have also been found to assess pupils' current level of knowledge and skills, and utilise teaching approaches which build on pupils' existing knowledge. Thus, teachers were asked if, at the beginning of the lesson, they asked questions of pupils to ascertain what they already knew. Almost all teachers in both 1996/97 and 1999/2000 (96.4% and 98.6%, respectively) said that they sometimes, or always, asked questions of several pupils at the beginning of the lesson (Table 6.13). Furthermore, there was a significant increase (χ^2=6.19; *df*=1; *p*<.05) in 1999/2000 in the percentage of teachers who indicated that they *always* asked several pupils questions at the beginning of class.

Table 6.13. Numbers and percentages of teachers in 1996/97 and 1999/2000 who indicated that they never, rarely, sometimes, or always ascertained pupils' level of knowledge at the beginning of class.

At the beginning of a lesson, do you ask questions of several pupils to find out what they already know?				
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
1996/97 (*n*=308)	2 (0.6%)	7 (2.3%)	192 (61.9%)	107 (34.5%)
1999/2000 (*n*=288)	2 (0.7%)	2 (0.7%)	155 (53.8%)	129 (44.8%)

The use of frequent reviews to ensure that pupils have successfully acquired the knowledge and skills which were taught has been identified as an effective classroom practice. As was the case in 1996/97, almost all teachers in 1999/2000 (98.3% and 99.0%, respectively) reported that they sometimes, or always, ascertained what pupils had learned at the end of a lesson (Table 6.14).

Table 6.14. Numbers and percentages of teachers in 1996/97 and 1999/2000 who indicated that, at the end of a lesson, they never, rarely, sometimes, or always asked questions to find out what pupils had learned.

At the end of a lesson, do you ask questions to find out what pupils have learned?				
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
1996/97 (*n*=308)	1 (0.3%)	2 (0.6%)	86 (27.7%)	219 (70.6%)
1999/2000 (*n*=289)	1 (0.3%)	2 (0.7%)	84 (29.1%)	202 (69.9%)

In a related item, teachers indicated the extent to which they believed that their success or failure in teaching their pupils was due to factors beyond their control rather than to their own efforts and abilities (Table 6.15).

Table 6.15. Numbers and percentages of teachers in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 who indicated various levels of agreement with the statement that their success or failure in teaching pupils is due primarily to factors beyond their control rather than to their own efforts and ability.

Do you believe success or failure in teaching pupils is due primarily to factors beyond your control rather than to your own efforts and ability?					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1996/97 (*n*=307)	57 (16.5%)	132 (38.3%)	79 (22.9%)	62 (18.0%)	9 (2.6%)
1997/98 (*n*=280)	30 (10.7%)	105 (37.5%)	66 (23.6%)	62 (22.1%)	17 (6.1%)
1998/99 (*n*=260)	25 (8.8%)	106 (37.3%)	76 (26.8%)	65 (22.9%)	12 (4.2%)
1999/2000 (*n*=288)	29 (10.1%)	113 (39.2%)	61 (21.2%)	70 (24.3%)	15 (5.2%)

Between 1996/97 and 1999/2000, there was a significant increase (χ^2=5.83; *df*=1; $p<.05$) in the percentage of teachers who disagreed, or strongly disagreed, that their pupils' performance was due to factors beyond their control (20.6% vs. 29.5% respectively). Although this finding suggests that the scheme had a positive effect on teachers' perceptions, the fact that almost half of teachers in

1999/2000 attributed their pupils' performance to factors beyond their control is of some concern in light of the research on school effectiveness, which suggests that teachers' acceptance of responsibility for their pupils' success or failure is a key feature of effective teaching.

Since the use of a wide variety of instructional strategies depending upon the situation is a practice also associated with effective teaching (Hertling, Leonard, Lumsden, Smith, & Picus, 2000), teachers were asked about the extent to which they adhered to a specific teaching methodology or varied their teaching style for different pupils when presenting a topic. Teachers were significantly more likely (χ^2=4.72; *df*=1;, *p*<.05) in 1999/2000 than in 1996/97 to report that they varied their teaching style for different pupils (Table 6.16).

Table 6.16. Numbers and percentages of teachers in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 who indicated which *one* of the two options listed they tried to do more.

When presenting a topic do you try to adhere to a specific methodology or vary your teaching style for different pupils?		
	Specific Methodology	Vary teaching style
1996/97 (*n*=310)	28 (9.0%)	282 (91.0%)
1997/98 (*n*=280)	21 (7.5%)	259 (92.5%)
1998/99 (*n*=277)	19 (6.9%)	258 (93.1%)
1999/2000 (*n*=284)	12 (4.2%)	272 (95.8%)

Teachers were asked about their homework assignment practices. In both 1996/97 and 1999/2000, the vast majority (99.5% and 99.3% respectively) assigned homework to their pupils (Table 6.17).

Table 6.17. Numbers and percentages of teachers who indicated whether or not they assigned homework to their pupils in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

	Yes	No
1996/97	309 (99.5%)	1 (0.3%)
1999/2000	287 (99.3%)	2 (0.7%)

In a related item, teachers indicated how often they sought to involve parents in their children's homework. As Table 6.18 illustrates, the percentage of teachers who reported that they asked all parents to *help* with homework increased significantly (χ^2=13.36; *df*=1; *p*<.001) between 1996/97 and 1999/2000 (47.5% and 61.9%, respectively). Furthermore, there was a significant increase (*p*<.05) in the percentage of teachers who asked all parents to supervise and sign their children's homework.

Overall, it would seem that the majority of teachers in 1999/2000 sought to promote parents' involvement in their children's homework. Furthermore, the finding that over half of teachers were asking all parents to help with their children's homework suggests that teachers were trying to get parents more *actively* involved. This finding is consistent with the scheme's objective of promoting parental involvement in their children's education.

Table 6.18. Numbers and percentages of teachers in 1996/97 and 1999/2000 who indicated that they asked some, all, or no parents to help pupils with their homework, to ensure that homework was completed, and to sign homework.

		All	Some	None
Do you ask parents to help with homework?	1996/97	116 (37.7%)	163 (52.9%)	28 (9.1%)
	1999/2000	151 (53.0%)	119 (41.8%)	15 (5.3%)
Do you ask parents to make sure their children do their homework?	1996/97	220 (71.2%)	75 (24.3%)	13 (4.2%)
	1999/2000	227 (79.4%)	48 (16.8%)	11 (3.8%)
Do you ask parents to sign pupils' homework?	1996/97	88 (28.6%)	73 (23.7%)	146 (47.4%)
	1999/2000	110 (38.7%)	74 (26.1%)	100 (35.2%)

Finally, teachers were asked to indicate the frequency with which they sent report cards to parents (Table 6.19). Although one-third of teachers in 1999/2000 indicated that they never sent report cards, there was a significant increase in the percentage who did so yearly (55.8% in 1996/97 vs. 64.7% in 1999/2000). Only a minority of teachers in both years sent them once per term or every week.

Table 6.19. Numbers and percentages of teachers who indicated various frequencies with which they sent report cards to parents in 1996/97 and 1999/2000.

	Never	Yearly	One per term	Monthly	Every week
1996/97 (*n*=303)	115 (37.1%)	173 (55.8%)	13 (4.2%)	-	2 (0.6%)
1999/2000 (*n*=283)	91 (32.2%)	183 (64.7%)	8 (2.8%)	-	1 (0.4%)

6.4 TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PUPILS' BACKGROUND AND ATTITUDES

Teachers were asked for their perceptions of how pupils' home lives might affect their academic performance, and for their long-term expectations for their pupils. Perceptions of their pupils' ability were also examined.

Although there was a significant increase (χ^2=4.56; *df*=1; p<.05) since 1996/97 in the percentage of teachers who indicated that 80% or more pupils came from home backgrounds which interfered with their ability to learn, only a minority of teachers (4.6%) felt this was the case (Table 6.20). Of interest is the finding that teachers in the second two years of the scheme (i.e., 1997/98 and 1998/99) were more likely than in 1996/97 and 1999/2000 to indicate that 61% of more of their pupils came from home backgrounds which interfered with their ability to learn. By 1999/2000, however, the majority of teachers (72.9%) felt that home backgrounds interfered for only 40% or fewer of their pupils.

Table 6.20. Numbers and percentages of teachers in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 who indicated their perception of the percentage of pupils whose home background interfered seriously with their ability to learn effectively.

	< 20%	**20-40%**	**41-60%**	**61-80%**	**80%+**
1996/97 (*n*=303)	144 (46.5%)	87 (28.1%)	41 (13.2%)	27 (8.7%)	4 (1.3%)
1997/98 (*n*=283)	26 (9.3%)	91 (32.6%)	63 (22.6%)	76 (27.2%)	23 (8.2%)
1998/99 *(n*=281)	35 (12.9%)	106 (38.0%)	56 (20.7%)	65 (24.0%)	12 (4.4%)
1999/2000 (*n*=284)	97 (34.2%)	110 (38.7%)	46 (16.2%)	18 (6.3%)	13 (4.6%)

As research indicates that effective teachers have high expectations for their pupils regardless of their pupils' background and life experience (e.g., Lumsden, 1997), teachers were also asked about their long-term expectations for their pupils. Specifically, they were asked to estimate the percentage of their pupils that they expected to continue in school beyond the Junior Certificate Examination. There were no significant differences in teachers' estimates between 1996/97 and 1999/2000. As was the case in 1996/97, one-third of teachers believed that 80% or more pupils would continue their schooling after the Junior Certificate (Table 6.21), and one-third felt that 61 to 80% of pupils would do so. Less than 10% of teachers estimated that fewer than 40% of pupils would continue in school. These findings may be contrasted with pupils' own estimates of how far they would continue in school. Although there were no changes in teachers' expectations since the outset of the scheme, the data in Chapter 4 suggest that the 6th class cohort in 2000 were more ambitious than their counterparts in 1997. Although only 34.8% of teachers felt 80% or more of pupils would continue beyond the Junior Certificate, 92.9% of pupils in 2000 felt that they would complete the Leaving Certificate or go on to third level education (see Table 4.4 in Chapter 4). Thus, it appears that pupils were more ambitious than teachers recognised.

Furthermore, it is estimated that, on average, 96% of pupils nationally completed the Junior Cycle between 1990 and 1997 (McCormack & Archer, 1998; Collins & Williams, 1998). Also, the Government White Paper on education (*Charting our Education Future)* indicated that over 80% of those who entered second-level schools completed the Leaving Certificate (or Applied Leaving Certificate) in 1995 (Ireland, 1995). Hence, it can be estimated that between 80% and 90% of pupils (approximately) continue in school beyond the Junior Certificate each year. Thus, as was the case in 1996/97, the majority of teachers in 1999/2000 (65.2%) of teachers expected their pupils to achieve below the national rate of completion of Senior Cycle.

Table 6.21. Numbers and percentages of teachers in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 who estimated the percentage of their pupils that would continue beyond Junior Certificate.

About what percentage of your pupils will, in your opinion, continue beyond Junior Certificate?					
	< 20%	20-40%	41-60%	61-80%	80%+
1996/97 (*n*=304)	2 (0.7%)	36 (11.8%)	63 (20.7%)	117 (38.5%)	86 (28.2%)
1997/98 (*n*=283)	7 (2.5%)	25 (8.8%)	41 (14.5%)	107 (37.8%)	103 (36.4%)
1998/99 (*n*=280)	4 (1.4%)	21 (7.5%)	49 (17.5%)	97 (34.6%)	109 (38.9%)
1999/2000 (*n*=287)	8 (2.8%)	20 (7.0%)	54 (18.8%)	105 (36.6%)	100 (34.8%)

In a related item, teachers were asked whether they agreed that, if taught properly, almost all pupils could learn to read and write satisfactorily. Again, there were no changes over the course of the scheme in teachers' perceptions of their pupils' ability to learn. As was the case in 1996/97, the majority of teachers in 1999/2000 (71.6% and 65.4% respectively) felt that all pupils could achieve at least a basic level of literacy if taught properly (Table 6.22). Less than 20% indicated that they were uncertain, and 16.8% disagreed that all children could learn to read and write if taught properly.

Table 6.22. Numbers and percentages of teachers in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 endorsing various levels of agreement with the statement that, if taught properly, almost all children can learn to read and write satisfactorily.

If taught properly, almost all children can learn to read and write satisfactorily.					
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1996/97	57 (18.4%)	165 (53.2%)	49 (15.8%)	31 (10.0%)	5 (1.6%)
1997/98	51 (18.2%)	143 (50.9%)	51 (18.2%)	33 (11.7%)	3 (1.1%)
1998/99	48 (16.9%)	149 (52.5%)	45 (15.8%)	33 (11.6%)	9 (3.2%)
1999/2000	44 (15.4%)	143 (50.0%)	51 (17.8%)	46 (16.1%)	2 (0.7%)

6.5 TEACHERS' OPINIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF *BREAKING THE CYCLE*

Teachers were asked about their opinions and experiences of participating in the scheme. In 1996/97 and 1999/2000, teachers were asked about their perceptions of the school atmosphere. In all four years, they were asked about how the scheme had affected their attitudes and teaching practices. The 1997/98, 1998/99, and 1999/2000 questionnaires also included items regarding teachers' views on the scheme's impact on their pupils.

As was the case in 1996/97, the majority of teachers in 1999/2000 (73.3%) felt very much involved in the decision-making process in the school, and a quarter indicated that they were somewhat involved (Table 6.23). These findings are encouraging since decisions are more likely to be implemented effectively when those who are making them have a sense of ownership in the process (Liontos, 1994).

Table 6.23. Numbers and percentages of teachers who felt very much involved, somewhat involved or not at all involved in the decision-making process in their school in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

	Very much involved	Somewhat involved	Not at all involved
1996/97 (*n*=188)	123 (64.4%)	59 (30.9%)	6 (3.1%)
1999/2000 (*n*=180)	132 (73.3%)	46 (25.6%)	2 (1.1%)

In a related item, teachers were asked how strong the sense of community was in their school. There was a significant increase (χ^2=4.56; *df*=1; *p*<.05) since the outset of the scheme in the percentage of teachers who felt that the sense of community was very strong (46.1% in 1996/97 vs. 64.4% in 1999/2000) (Table 6.24). One-third of teachers indicated that it was fairly strong, while only a minority (5.2%) felt that it was fairly weak. Similarly, a significantly higher percentage of teachers in 1999/2000 than in 1996/97 (χ^2=11.02; *df*=1; *p*<.001) indicated that their work in the school made them feel very much a part of the community (45.5% in 1996/97 vs. 59.7% in 1999/2000).

Table 6.24. Numbers and percentages of teachers who endorsed various options about (a) sense of community within their school and, (b) how their work made them feel part of a community in 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

How strong is the 'sense of community' within your school?			
	Very strong	Fairly strong	Fairly weak
1996/97	143 (46.1%)	134 (43.2%)	32 (10.3%)
1999/2000	172 (64.4%)	81 (30.3%)	14 (5.2%)
Does your work in the school make you feel part of a community?			
	Very much so	Somewhat	Not at all
1996/97	141 (45.5%)	151 (48.7%)	16 (5.2%)
1999/2000	160 (59.7%)	103 (38.4%)	5 (1.9%)

In addition to having a positive effect on the general atmosphere in the school, it appears that participation in the scheme resulted in positive changes in teachers' knowledge and instructional practices. Over half of teachers in 1999/2000 (58.2%) felt that their participation in the scheme had improved their understanding of the nature of educational disadvantage a lot, while 36.9% believed that their understanding had improved somewhat (Table 6.25). The fact that there was a significant increase (χ^2=88.12; *df*=1; *p*<.001) in 1999/2000 in the percentage of teachers who felt that their knowledge of educational disadvantage had increased *a lot* seems to indicate that the scheme was effective in this regard. Similarly, there was a significant increase in 1999/2000 in the percentage of teachers who reported a lot of improvement in their ability to organise their work on the basis of knowledge and needs of disadvantaged children (χ^2=88.12; *df*=1; *p*<.001) (10.3% in 1996/97 vs. 44.7% in 1999/2000), and in the percentage who felt that they were better able to adopt teaching

strategies that respond effectively to the learning needs of disadvantaged children (χ^2=87.57; *df*=1; *p*<.001) (13.2% in 1996/97 vs. 42.2% in 1999/2000). Finally, significantly more teachers in 1999/2000 than in 1996/97 (χ^2=54.22; *df*=1; *p*<.001) thought that their ability to review and record pupils' progress had improved a lot (35.5% vs. 10.5% respectively).

Table 6.25. Percentages of teachers in 1996/97 and 1999/2000 who believed that *Breaking the Cycle* had improved their ability to….

Understand the nature of educational disadvantage.			
	A lot	Somewhat	Not at all
1996/97 (*N*=310)	20.3%	64.2%	13.5%
1999/2000 (*n*=282)	58.2%	36.9%	5.0%
Organise my work on the basis of knowledge and needs of disadvantaged children.			
	A lot	Somewhat	Not at all
1996/97 (*N*=310)	10.3%	57.9%	27.0%
1999/2000 (*n*=282)	44.7%	47.5%	7.8%
Adopt teaching strategies that respond effectively to the learning needs of disadvantaged children.			
	A lot	Somewhat	Not at all
1996/97 (*N*=310)	13.2%	53.1%	28.6%
1999/2000 (*n*=282)	42.2%	49.3%	8.5%
Review and record pupils' progress.			
	A lot	Somewhat	Not at all
1996/97 (*N*=310)	10.0%	48.6%	36.7%
1999/2000 (*n*=282)	35.5%	50.0%	14.5%

Two further items required teachers to indicate the extent to which their teaching practices, opinions, and attitudes had changed as a result of being involved in *Breaking the Cycle*. In 1999/2000, the majority of teachers (74.4%) indicated that their teaching practices had very much, or somewhat, changed as a result of their participation in the scheme (Table 6.26). Similarly, 80% of teachers in 1999/2000 felt that the scheme had influenced their opinions and attitudes. Furthermore, that there were significant increases between 1997/98 and 1999/2000 in the percentage who felt that their teaching practices (χ^2=9.98; *df*=1; *p*<.01), and opinions and attitudes (χ^2=10.27; *df*=1; *p*<.01), had changed *very much*, might be taken as evidence that the scheme was effective in supporting teachers in offsetting the educational effects of disadvantage.

Table 6.26. Numbers and percentages of teachers who believed that their teaching practices and opinions and attitudes had changed as a result of being involved in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme in 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

My teaching practices have changed as a result of being involved in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme.					
	Very much so	Somewhat	Unsure	Not really	Not at all
1997/98 (*N*=284)	21 (7.5%)	146 (51.8%)	31 (11.0%)	60 (21.3%)	24 (8.5%)
1998/99 (*N*=273)	21 (7.7%)	168 (61.5%)	26 (9.5%)	45 (16.5%)	13 (4.8%)
1999/2000 (*N*=278)	46 (16.5%)	161 (57.9%)	20 (7.2%)	36 (12.9%)	15 (5.4%)
My opinions and attitudes have changed as a result of being involved in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme.					
	Very much so	Somewhat	Unsure	Not really	Not at all
1997/98 (*N*=283)	44 (15.6%)	162 (57.2%)	14 (5.0%)	41 (14.5%)	22 (7.8%)
1998/99 (*N*=274)	55 (20.1%)	158 (57.7%)	20 (7.3%)	29 (10.3%)	12 (4.4%)
1999/2000 (*n*=281)	76 (27.0%)	149 (53.0%)	15 (5.3%)	29 (10.3%)	12 (4.3%)

Teachers were asked in 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 whether they believed that marginalised pupils in their school had benefited from participating in *Breaking the Cycle*. The vast majority of teachers in 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 (77.6%, 89.2% and 90.2%, respectively) felt that the scheme had been of benefit (Table 6.27). Furthermore, there was a significant decrease (χ^2=9.92; *df*=1; *p*<.01) between 1997/98 and 1999/2000 in the percentage that were uncertain about the scheme's effect on pupils.

Table 6.27. Numbers and percentages of teachers who believed that marginalised pupils in their school had benefited from participating in *Breaking the Cycle* in 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

	Yes	Unsure	No
1997/98 (*N*=183)	142 (77.6%)	38 (20.8%)	3 (1.6%)
1998/99 (*N*=186)	166 (89.2%)	15 (8.1%)	5 (2.7%)
1999/2000 (*n*=194)	175 (90.2%)	17 (8.8%)	2 (1.0%)

In a follow-up item, teachers were asked to explain why they believed marginalised pupils had, or had not, benefited from the scheme. Responses are presented in Table 6.28.

Table 6.28. Numbers and percentages of teachers who gave various explanations as to why they believed 'marginalised' pupils had or had not benefited from *Breaking the Cycle* in 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

Category	**Number %* 1997/98 (*N*=169)**	**Number %* 1998/99 (*N*=159)**	**Number %* 1999/2000 (*N*=269)**
Extra equipment / materials	92 54.4%	84 52.6%	85 31.6%
Chance to partake in activities not otherwise possible / out-of-school activities	23 13.6%	37 23.3%	58 21.6%
More parental interest an co-operation / increased home-school liaison	26 54.4%	30 18.9%	25 9.3%
More time for the pupils/ learned to focus on disadvantaged pupils / early identification of problems / individual attention	14 8.3%	20 12.6%	24 8.9%
Extra help from co-ordinator / one-to-one meetings between pupils and cluster co-ordinator	23 13.6%	22 13.8%	22 8.2%
Too early to tell / unsure	9 5.3%	5 3.1%	8 2.9%
Financial benefits	11 6.5%	17 10.7%	7 2.6%
Improved pupil self-esteem /social skills / self-confidence	9 5.3%	9 5.7%	7 2.6%
Pupils' perception of school changed (e.g., more interesting) / better attendance / better behaviour	3 1.8%	10 6.3%	3 1.1%
Some parents unwilling to participate	2 1.2%	1 0.6%	2 0.7%
No benefit / general negative comment	-	3 1.9%	2 0.7%
Other (e.g., more remedial teachers needed, pupil-teacher ratios too high, children benefited from pre-school course)	13 7.7%	12 7.5%	12 4.5%

*Percentages sum to more than 100% as teachers were permitted to give more than one explanation.

There was little change over the three years in the main reasons teachers cited for believing that marginalised pupils had benefited from the scheme. In 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000, they were most likely to report that the extra equipment and materials were of benefit to pupils. For example, one teacher commented:

Purchase of library books and educational toys gave all children equal opportunity.

Participation in out-of-school activities was also viewed by teachers as having been beneficial for pupils (13.6%, 23.3% and 21.6% in 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000, respectively), with most noting that such activities and experiences would not have been otherwise possible. Approximately 10% of teachers in 1999/2000 also noted that improved home-school links, increased individual attention, early identification of pupils' problems, and extra help from the co-ordinator were beneficial. According to one teacher:

> In the past a high percentage of the marginalised pupils did not benefit from our efforts due to reluctance to change at home. We do not have that problem now.

Eight teachers felt that it was too early to tell what the benefits were, while four made a negative statement, for example, commenting that some parents were unco-operative, or that there was not enough time with the co-ordinator. For the most part, however, teachers' comments were positive.

The finding that 21.6% of teachers reported that out-of-school activities were beneficial is consistent with principals' perceptions that pupils had derived great benefit from such events. Principals reported that pupils spent between 1 and 1.5 hours per week on out-of-school activities (see Table 5.43 in Chapter 5). It is worth noting that this represents a considerable proportion of the total time available during the school week, and while such activities may provide a multiplicity of benefits, teachers should aim to maximise the instructional opportunities provided by the activities. In fact, teachers in 1999/2000 reported spending approximately 1.5 hours of class time both before and after the activity on issues relating to it (Table 6.29).

Table 6.29. Mean amount of time (in hours) teachers devoted to issues relating to an out-of-school activity in 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

	Before	After
1997/98 (*n*=248)	1.31	1.05
1998/99 (*n*=285)	1.08	1.08
1999/2000 (*n*=250)	1.60	1.50

Over half of teachers used essays, poems, and other written work as a means of incorporating the out-of-school activities into their lessons, while 35.4% used art and craft, 31.8% used class discussions and 24.2% used songs, dance, drama and music (Table 6.30). A minority of teachers also used practical work and history to incorporate the activity or project into the lesson. For example, one teacher explained how a trip to the theatre performing 'The Legend of the Golden Dragon' was accompanied by a study of the history and background of the story, and children made illustrated stories in books which related to the performance. Another teacher described a special project which was organised for pupils:

> The pupils, after a week's guidance, succeeded in creating the history of the…parish in art form on a (16'X4') mural (wall hanging). They had explored the final product via stories, geography, history, art and craft, archaeology, Gaeilge….

Table 6.30. Number of teachers indicating various ways they incorporated an out-of-school activity into lessons (*N*=277).

	Number of teachers	**% of teachers**
Essay / poems / creative writing / language development / worksheets / other written work	145	52.3
Class discussion	98	35.4
Art & craft	88	31.8
Songs / dance / drama / music	67	24.2
History	32	11.6
Practising skills learned / doing practical work	26	9.4
Other	24	8.7

In all three years, the vast majority of teachers reported that children had benefited educationally from out-of-school activities (Table 6.31).

Table 6.31. Numbers and percentages of teachers who indicated that pupils had derived educational benefits from out-of-school activities in 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

	Yes	Unsure	No
1997/98 (*n*=237)	219 (92.4%)	16 (6.8%)	2 (0.8%)
1998/99 (*n*=248)	237 (95.6%)	9 (3.6%)	2 (0.8%)
1999/2000 (*n*=255)	247 (96.9%)	7 (2.7%)	1 (0.4%)

Finally, teachers were given the opportunity to make general comments about the scheme. Responses were classified into categories based on the kind of comments given (Table 6.32).

Table 6.32. Numbers and percentages of teachers who made various comments on *Breaking the Cycle* in 1999/2000.

Category	**Number (%) (*N*=231)**
General (unspecific) positive comment *(e.g. we are very happy about the scheme)*	67 (29.0%)
Funding for equipment and materials beneficial *(e.g. books, games)*	19 (8.2%)
Extra funding welcomed (unspecific)	16 (6.9%)
Need smaller classes / lower pupil-teacher ratios	13 (5.6%)
Funding for special projects / out-of-school activities beneficial	11 (4.7%)
Increase in workload / assessment / planning extra-curricular activities / completing questionnaires	9 (3.9%)
Parental involvement increased / increase in home-school links/ parental courses beneficial	9 (3.9%)
More inservice needed / whole school inservice would be better / inservice should be nearer school	8 (3.5%)
General (unspecific) negative comment *(e.g., the scheme does not go far enough towards addressing disadvantage)*	6 (2.6%)
No point in the scheme if school loses teacher / should retain teacher quota during the scheme / no remedial teacher	4 (1.7%)
Other (e.g., extra space required, *Breaking the Cycle* funds should not be used to pay for psychological assessments, benefits of interacting with other schools)	23 (10.0%)

Several teachers used the opportunity to voice their concerns about various aspects of the scheme and to make suggestions. For example, 3.9% reported that the scheme resulted in an increased workload, and 3.5% made comments relating to the inaccessibility of inservice. A further four teachers commented on the loss of teaching staff, and 5.6% suggested a need for smaller class sizes. Finally, six teachers made general negative comments. Two comments supplied by teachers included:

> Very difficult to replace our initial co-ordinator post- doesn't seem attractive to teachers. Still no contact with *Breaking the Cycle* organisers and no inservice.

> I feel the role of the co-ordinator should be more defined…at the moment she is trying to cater for the needs of five schools which makes her job very, very difficult.

For the most part, however, teachers' comments were positive. They commented that the funding was of benefit and that parental involvement had increased, and 29% made a general positive comment. A selection of such comments are included below:

> *Breaking the Cycle* has had a huge impact on our school- children and teachers have all benefited greatly.

> *Breaking the Cycle* has been a simply great benefit to our school, educationally, financially and socially. It has opened up our closed environment in so many ways and all the new faces that children in our rural school see can only prepare them for the stream of teachers they will be meeting in Secondary. Prior to now it was just 2 (3) teachers that stood before those children for the entire day- now we have a variety of 'extras'- PE, Music, French, singing, poetry, drama, etc.

> *Breaking the Cycle* has had a very positive and worthwhile influence on our school. It has opened up our school to parents and to the wider community and has improved relationships between parents, teachers and pupils. It has also made parents aware of their own capacity to help and support their children. If we continue to build on this we will be talking about a new type of school in the future…

> It has broadened our horizons, brought the cluster teachers into regular contact- sharing ideas and knowledge. It has made us more open to change and new ideas. Thank you.

6.6 CONCLUSION

The responses of all teachers who participated in the scheme between 1996/97 and 1999/2000 were analysed to ascertain whether their attitudes and teaching practices had changed. Particular emphasis was placed on the results of the 1996/97 teacher questionnaire, which described teachers' views at the outset of the scheme, and the 1999/2000 teacher questionnaire, which described their perceptions towards the end of the five-year pilot project.

The teaching staff in schools participating in the scheme were overwhelmingly female. The majority were full-time and most had many years teaching experience. Although there were suggestions by some principals and teachers in 1999/2000 that class sizes should be reduced, the data indicate that there was a significant decrease since the outset of the scheme in the mean number of pupils per class. Most teachers in 1999/2000 taught approximately 20 pupils, and the majority reported having more than one instructional level per class. Although they represent a challenge for

teachers, multi-grade classes can also be of benefit since a heterogeneous mix of ages and abilities can help to promote cognitive growth, decrease antisocial behaviour, discourage age-related expectations on the part of the teacher, and encourage teachers to focus on individual pupils' needs. However, the fact that several principals and teachers raised concerns about multi-grade classes suggests that teachers in such classes might benefit from additional support.

In 1999/2000, teachers spent the most time on English, followed by Mathematics and Irish. The fact that more time was spent on English than on Mathematics might help to explain why pupils' performance was slightly weaker in tests of numeracy than in literacy (Chapter 3). Furthermore, while there was no overall decrease in the time spent on English between 1996/97 and 1999/2000, the amount of time that teachers devoted to Mathematics and Irish decreased significantly. However, it appears that the decline in time spent on Mathematics did not have an impact on pupils' achievement. Anyhow, the time teachers spent on Mathematics and English in 1999/2000 was considerably higher than the minimum time recommended in the new Primary School Curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999).

Analysis of the percentage of English and Mathematics time that teachers devoted to whole class, small group, and individual teaching revealed no significant changes between 1996/97 and 1999/2000. In both years, teachers spent just over 50% of class time on whole class teaching, approximately 25% of the time instructing small groups, and less than 20% working with individual pupils. Their instructional style for Irish lessons, in which most class time was spent on whole class teaching, was slightly different. However, there was a significant decrease in whole class teaching in 1999/2000, and a slight increase in small group and individual pupil instruction, which is in line with Harris and Murtagh's (1999) recommendation to increase the use of small group work in Irish lessons.

The majority of teachers reported using instructional strategies which one might expect to be effective in teaching. For example, 94.8% said that they sometimes, or always, made it clear to pupils what was to be learned prior to the lesson, and almost all teachers sometimes, or always, asked pupils questions at the end of the lesson to find out what they had learned. Since the majority of teachers were already engaging in such practices in 1996/97, it is difficult to gauge the scheme's effect in this area. However, the fact that there was a significant increase in the percentage of teachers who reported that they *always* ascertained pupils' level of knowledge prior to a lesson and in the percentage who varied their teaching style for different pupils suggests that involvement in the scheme resulted in some positive changes in teachers' practices. Finally, it appears that teachers were committed to promoting active parental involvement in their children's education, as there was a significant increase in 1999/2000 in the percentage of teachers who asked all parents to help with, monitor, and sign their children's homework.

In contrast, the findings suggest that the scheme was not entirely effective in influencing teachers' attitudes and expectations. Teachers were significantly less likely in 1999/2000 than in 1996/97 to attribute their pupils' success or failure to factors beyond their control, suggesting that the

scheme had some impact on teachers' willingness to take responsibility for their pupils' performance. Nevertheless, almost half of teachers in 1999/2000 continued to attribute their pupils' performance to factors beyond their control rather than to their own teaching experience and ability. This finding is of some concern in light of the research on school effectiveness, which suggests that teachers' acceptance of responsibility for their pupils' success or failure is one feature of effective teaching (Kellaghan, 1994). Furthermore, there was little change in teachers' long-term expectations for their pupils. Almost two-thirds of teachers in 1999/2000 continued to expect their pupils to achieve below the national rate of completion of Senior Cycle. This finding is of some concern in light of the fact that teachers' expectations and the assumptions they make about pupils' potential may have significant effects on how well and how much pupils learn. Specifically, teachers often, either consciously or unconsciously, communicate their expectations to their pupils. Pupils, in turn, tend to adopt the beliefs that teachers have about their ability and adjust their behaviour accordingly, thereby reinforcing teachers' original expectations (Lumsden, 1997). However, it appears that, despite teachers' low expectations, pupils themselves had high ambitions with regard to furthering their education. For example, 92.6% of 6th class pupils in 2000 felt that they would actually complete the Leaving Certificate or proceed to third level. An even higher percentage (94.9%) indicated that they would like to do the Leaving Certificate or go to college/university. These findings suggest that teachers' low expectations did not have a major impact on pupils' own ambitions. Nevertheless, efforts to sensitize teachers to their possible biases and to increase their awareness of the possible detrimental effects that these biases can have on their pupils may be useful.

Finally, there were no significant changes during the scheme in teachers' perceptions of pupils' home background and in their beliefs about pupils' ability. As was the case at the beginning of the scheme, almost three-quarters of teachers felt that less than 40% of pupils had home backgrounds which interfered seriously with their ability to learn, and almost two-thirds agreed that all children could achieve a basic level of literacy if taught properly.

Although the data suggest that the scheme had only a limited impact on teachers' perceptions of their pupils' work and background, most teachers perceived the scheme as having had a positive impact on their own attitudes and opinions. The majority also felt that their teaching practices had changed since the outset of the scheme. Furthermore, teachers in 1999/2000 were significantly more likely than at the outset of the scheme to indicate that their understanding of educational disadvantage and their ability to respond effectively to the needs of disadvantaged children had greatly improved.

It also appears that the scheme had a positive effect on the school atmosphere in general. For example, most teachers reported feeling involved in the decision-making process in the school. Furthermore, the majority indicated that their school had a very strong sense of community, and that their work in the school made them feel a part of a community. These findings are consistent with principals' reports that the scheme had a very positive effect on the school in general, and on morale, and may also help to explain why principals were having few difficulties in retaining teaching staff, as

the involvement of teachers in the decision-making process can help to increase their commitment to the school, improve morale, and build trust among staff (Liontos, 1994).

Teachers also perceived the scheme as having a positive effect on pupils. One-third commented that the dedicated funding under the scheme provided pupils with materials and opportunities that they would have otherwise been denied. Furthermore, out-of-school activities and special projects were perceived to have had a very positive impact on pupils. Although out-of-school activities occupied a considerable amount of the total time available during the school week (on average, 1 to 1.5 hours per week), it seems that teachers, for the most part, sought to maximise the instructional opportunities provided by the activities.

A review of teachers' responses during the first four years of the scheme highlight a few areas where further attention is required. For example, consideration should be given to strategies to sensitize teachers to their possible biases, and additional support to teachers in multi-grade classes may be of benefit. Some teachers also felt that inservice should be made more accessible. Finally, several teachers raised concerns relating to the cluster co-ordinator's availability and workload (most of which were also raised by co-ordinators themselves (see Chapter 8). For the most part, however, the findings suggest that participation in the scheme had a positive impact on teachers' instructional practices, on pupils and the school in general, and, to some extent, on teachers' attitudes and expectations.

7. THE RURAL CO-ORDINATORS

In June 1998, all 25 co-ordinators in the rural component of the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme completed questionnaires which were designed to elicit information on their role, experiences, and views on the operation of the scheme. The results of the 1997/98 questionnaire were reported in the *Interim Report on the Evaluation of the Breaking the Cycle Scheme in Rural Schools* (Weir & Ryan, 2000).

To determine whether their role, experiences and perceptions had changed since 1997/98, follow-up questionnaires were posted to all co-ordinators (N=25) in early April 2001. To allow for comparison between the 1997/98 and 2000/2001 responses, the same basic format and items from the 1997/98 questionnaire were retained in the 2000/2001 questionnaire. Although an attempt was also made to incorporate new issues raised by co-ordinators in 1997/98 into the follow-up questionnaire, the same core information relating to the co-ordinators' experiences and perceptions was gathered.

The 2000/2001 questionnaire contained 43 items, some of which had more than one part. While some of the items could be readily answered, others required respondents to reflect on their attitudes and experiences. Twenty items required the respondent to read a statement or question and to respond by ticking one of a set of related response options. Seven of these 20 questions also allowed for respondents to elaborate on their answer. Eight items required values to be entered in boxes (e.g., to indicate the percentage of time spent on various tasks). The remaining items were open-ended, and required the co-ordinator to provide a written response to a question. For economy of reporting, all responses to open-ended items have been grouped into categories, based on the kind of responses given. These categories are based on ones which were developed for the 1997/98 co-ordinator questionnaire.

Eighteen questionnaires were returned to the Educational Research Centre. The decrease in the response rate in 2000/2001 (72%), in comparison with 1997/98 (100%), can be attributed to the fact that six of the 25 rural co-ordinator posts were vacant when the 2000/2001 questionnaire was distributed. One co-ordinator did not return the questionnaire. Thus, the following analysis is based on the 18 questionnaires that were returned. Clearly, the fact that the number of respondents is small imposes constraints on the kind of statistical analysis that is possible. For this reason, this section is largely descriptive.

7.1 THE ROLE AND WORK OF THE CO-ORDINATOR

The first questionnaire item required co-ordinators to indicate the number of schools in their cluster. The majority of co-ordinators (72%) had five schools in their cluster. However, one had three schools, two had four schools, and two had six schools.

Co-ordinators were asked to indicate when they began work as a *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator. Responses revealed a high turnover among co-ordinators, with only 38.9% (n=7) of those co-ordinators who had commenced work in January 1997 remaining in the post (Table 7.1).

Table 7.1. Number of co-ordinators who commenced work as a *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator in the years 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99, 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 (*N*=18).

School Year	Number of co-ordinators who took up posts during the year	%
1996/97	*N*=7	38.9%
1997/98	*N*=1	5.6%
1998/99	*N*=3	16.7%
1999/2000	*N*=4	22.2%
2000/2001	*N*=3	16.7%

The fact that the turnover rate is so high and that six co-ordinator posts were vacant in May 2001 suggests that there may still be factors which render the post unattractive. As one co-ordinator noted in the questionnaire:

> … 25 very enthusiastic, motivated and excited teachers started in January '97 and within two years the dissatisfaction (reflected by turnover of co-ordinators) was becoming very evident.

The next set of questionnaire items related specifically to the co-ordinator's role. Co-ordinators were asked to indicate the extent of the difference (if any) between their own perception of their role and that of the principal in each of the schools in their cluster. The vast majority of co-ordinators (74.1%) reported that the perceptions of the principal were not very, or not at all, different from their own (Table 7.2). One in six co-ordinators stated that there was a discrepancy between their perceptions, and 6% of respondents were unsure.

These results suggest that communication and consultation between principals and co-ordinators has increased since 1997/98, when only 51.6% of co-ordinators felt that principals' perceptions of the co-ordinators' role were consistent with their own. This view was also reflected by a co-ordinator, who wrote:

> Views of principals have changed since 1997 when I first worked in this position. I felt it necessary to explain my role and at this point all principals have taken this on board. Discussion is very important and this takes place on a regular basis. Being involved in cluster meetings has been of great importance.

Table 7.2. Co-ordinators' ratings in 2000/2001of the extent of difference between their perception of their role and that of *principals* in each of the schools in the cluster*.

	Very different	Fairly different	Unsure	Not very different	Not at all different
School 1	---	*n*=1	---	*n*=12	*n*=5
School 2	*n*=2	*n*=3	---	*n*=9	*n*=4
School 3	*n*=1	*n*=1	*n*=3	*n*=11	*n*=2
School 4	*n*=1	*n*=3	*n*=4	*n*=7	*n*=3
School 5	---	*n*=2	*n*=1	*n*=8	*n*=4
School 6	---	*n*=1	---	*n*=1	---
Total (across all schools) in 2001	***n*=4 (4.5%)**	***n*=11 (12.4%)**	***n*=8 (9.0%)**	***n*=48 (53.9%)**	***n*=18 (20.2%)**
Total across all schools in 1998	***n*=10 (8.2%)**	***n*=31 (25.4%)**	***n*=18 (14.8%)**	***n*=41 (33.6%)**	***n*=22 (18.0%)**

*The numbering of the schools from 1 – 6 is arbitrary, and was designed to encourage co-ordinators to think of each of the schools in turn when completing this item.

In a related question, respondents were asked to describe the nature of the differences, if any, between their perception of the role and that of the principals. Ten co-ordinators responded to this item. The most common source of difference (50%) reported was the principal's lack of support for home visits (Table 7.3). Disagreement also arose where principals expected the co-ordinator to spend all their time in the classroom, for example acting as a resource teacher (40%), and where principals felt too much of the co-ordinator's time was spent with parents (30%). For example, one co-ordinator reported:

> Some principals feel…that I ought to be more involved in actual teaching…I don't think they view home visits as important because in rural areas teachers know parents intimately.

Co-ordinators also said that principals saw the extra funding as the only benefit of the scheme (20%) and had a different definition of 'disadvantaged' (20%). In one case, the principal expected the co-ordinator to take over home-school links completely. However, an additional four co-ordinators also used the space to elaborate on why no difference existed. For example, one co-ordinator noted:

> The principals in this cluster are generally of the same view and we are in constant communication and consultation where all participants are likely to come to agreement with whatever initiatives are adopted.

Table 7.3. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 indicating the nature of the differences* between their perception of their role and that of the principals in their cluster (*N*=10**).

Type of response	**Number**	**%**
Principals do not support home visits (e.g., they feel threatened by what is being said)	5	50%
Principals expect co-ordinator to be a resource teacher / fill in for absent teachers / cover a particular topic / supervise classroom	4	40%
Principals think co-ordinator spends too much time doing work with parents / do not see parental involvement in children's education as important	3	30%
Some principals see extra money as the only benefit of the scheme	2	20%
Principals have a different definition of 'disadvantage'	2	20%
Principals expect co-ordinator to take over home-school links completely / principal no longer deals with parents	1	10%

* Only comments relating to *differences* were coded.
**Numbers sum to greater than 10 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

Co-ordinators were asked to assess whether differences existed between their own perception of their role and that of *teachers* in the cluster. The results resemble those found in the previous item relating to principals' perceptions, with the vast majority of co-ordinators (75%) reporting no incongruities between their own perceptions and those of teachers (Table 7.4). Only 18.2% of co-ordinators said that their perception of their role was very, or fairly, different from teachers' perceptions, and 6.8% were unsure. This represents a marked increase (16.5%) since 1997/98 in the number of co-ordinators who reported that their perception of their role was not very, or not at, all different from that of teachers.

Table 7.4. Co-ordinators' ratings of the extent of difference between their perception of their role and that of *teachers* in each of the schools' in the cluster*.

	Very different	Fairly different	Unsure	Not very different	Not at all different
School 1	*n*=2	---	*n*=1	*n*=11	*n*=4
School 2	*n*=2	*n*=1	*n*=1	*n*=8	*n*=5
School 3	*n*=2	*n*=1	*n*=1	*n*=12	*n*=2
School 4	*n*=3	*n*=2	*n*=2	*n*=8	*n*=3
School 5	*n*=1	*n*=1	*n*=1	*n*=10	*n*=2
School 6	*n*=1	---	---	*n*=1	---
Total (across all schools) in 2001	***n*=11 (12.5%)**	***n*=5 (5.7%)**	***n*=6 (6.8%)**	***n*=50 (56.8%)**	***n*=16 (18.2%)**
Total across all schools in 1998	***n*=6 (4.9%)**	***n*=25 (20.3%)**	***n*=20 (16.3%)**	***n*=53 (43.1%)**	***n*=19 (15.4%)**

*The numbering of the schools from 1 – 6 is arbitrary, and was designed to encourage co-ordinators to think of each of the schools in turn when completing this item.

In an open-ended item, co-ordinators were asked to describe the nature of the differences, if any, between their perception of their role and that of the teachers. Eleven co-ordinators provided an answer to this item. The main source of difference seemed to be where home-school links were concerned, as 45.5% of co-ordinators indicated that teachers felt threatened by increased parental involvement and parental education, and 27.3% said that teachers did not see the value of home visits (Table 7.5).

The results also suggest that the co-ordinators' role with regard to teaching in the classroom remains to be clarified, as 27.3% of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 stated that teachers expected them to act as a resource teacher. According to one co-ordinator:

> Some teachers think I have a *duty* to take pupils from their class every week, whether they need it or not...

In contrast, while 14.4% of co-ordinators in 1997/98 felt that teachers expected them to do remedial work, no co-ordinators in 2000/2001 felt this was the case. However it is unclear whether this finding is due to the fact that co-ordinators have clarified their role, or whether it is the result of factors such as increased access to resource teachers among rural schools.

Only two co-ordinators (18.2%) indicated that teachers did not understand, or did not value the work of the co-ordinator, compared to 5 (35.7%) in 1997/98. This finding, combined with the overall decrease in the discrepancy between teachers' and co-ordinators' perceptions, would seem to serve as further evidence that some of the complications which were present at the outset of the scheme had been resolved. As one co-ordinator noted:

> All my actions and programmes involve the staff from all schools as is relevant to their schools. This leads to greater harmony. Difficulties have arisen where staff changes have taken place. Discussion always solves these difficulties.

Table 7.5. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 indicating the nature of the differences* between their perception of their role and that of the teachers in their cluster (*N*=11**).

Type of response	**Number**	**%**
Teachers feel threatened by increased parental involvement / do not see value in it / do not see value of parental education	5	45.5%
Teachers want co-ordinator to be a resource teacher / substitution/ take pupils for extra tuition or take class on a regular basis	3	27.3%
Teachers do not see value in home visitations (e.g., want co-ordinators to relay negative messages to families)	3	27.3%
Teachers do not understand or do not value work of co-ordinator (as laid down by Department)	2	18.2%
Other (e.g., teachers aim to cover curriculum as well as possible)	8	72.7%

* Only comments relating to *differences* were coded.
**Numbers sum to greater than 11 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

In a related item, co-ordinators were given the opportunity to describe what they saw as the main purpose of their role. Co-ordinators' responses were grouped into categories (Table 7.6).

Table 7.6. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*N*=18*) specifying various main purposes of their work as a co-ordinator.

Response	**No.**	**%**
Foster link between home and school (general comment)	10	55.6%
Support teachers and learning support teachers/ act as a resource for them	8	44.4%
Facilitate parental involvement in their children's education / school life/ encourage parents to support their children's education (general comment)	7	8.9%
Support parents (general comment)	7	38.9%
Support marginalised pupils in their education / improve self-esteem, motivation / enhance skills in curriculum areas	5	27.8%
Organise courses / talks for parents	5	27.8%
Create a positive atmosphere in school / make school attractive / a happy experience for children	5	27.8%
Liaise with local / national agencies / other schools	4	22.2%
Visiting parents at home	4	22.2%
Ensure that marginalised children get the maximum from education / remain in education system	4	22.2%
Provide information on resources / expertise when purchasing new education materials	3	16.7%
Other (e.g., to identify local needs)	3	16.7%
Organise extra-curricular activities / out-of-school activities	2	11.1%

*Numbers sum to greater than 18 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

As was the case in 1997/98, a majority of co-ordinators (55.6%) saw the fostering of home-school links as integral to their role (Table 7.6). Similarly, 44% indicated that supporting teachers was an important element of their work.

All co-ordinators in 1997/98 listed the facilitation/support of parental involvement as crucial to their role. A direct comparison with the 1997/98 results is difficult as the response categories relating to the parental involvement/support were expanded in the 2000/2001 questionnaire. Nevertheless, it would appear that the promotion of parents' involvement in their children's education remains a key element of the co-ordinator's role, as co-ordinators reported that facilitating involvement in school was

important (38.9%), as was organising courses for parents (38.9%) and visiting parents at home (22.2%). Finally, 38.9% indicated that supporting parents in general was a significant part of their role.

Other purposes described by co-ordinators varied, and included supporting marginalised pupils (27.8%) and ensuring that they remain in the education system (22.2%), creating a positive atmosphere in school (27.8%), liaising with other agencies (22.2%), providing information/expertise in the purchasing of materials (16.7%), and organising out-of-school activities (11.1%).

As the co-ordinator's role involved liaising with outside agencies, respondents were asked to list some of the local/national organisations with which they had been in contact during the 2000/2001 school year. As is apparent in the breakdown of the responses (Table 7.7) co-ordinators were in contact with a wide variety of agencies, ranging from local theatres and galleries to government departments. The purpose of the contact also varied, and included, for example, arranging speech therapy, organising parental courses and planning recreational activities for pupils.

Table 7.7. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 listing various local and national organisations with which they had been in contact during the 2000/2001 school year (*N*=18*).

Agency	Number	%
Arts and music centres	13	72.2%
Local theatres	11	61.1%
Local health board	10	55.6%
Local Development Authority	8	44.4%
VEC	8	44.4%
FÁS	8	44.4%
Local heritage centres / museums	8	44.4%
Local / national sporting organisations (e.g., GAA)	7	38.9%
Local sports facilities (e.g., swimming pool, leisure centre)	7	38.9%
Local libraries	6	33.3%
Local teachers' Centre / Education Centre	5	27.8%
Local colleges/universities/secondary school	5	27.8%
County Council	5	27.8%
Govt. Departments (excluding Dept Ed.)	3	16.7%
Údaras na Gaeltachta	2	11.1%
Local / national charities	2	11.1%
Area Partnership	2	11.1%
Galleries	2	11.1%
Psychologist	2	11.1%
Gardai	2	11.1%
Other (e.g., Homework groups, tutorial groups, family centres)	24	-

*Numbers sum greater than 18 as more than one response was coded for each respondent.

To examine how they allocate their time, co-ordinators were asked to indicate the approximate percentage of time they spend on each of a variety of activities during a typical week. As well as giving percentages for the *actual* amount of time spent, they were asked to give the percentage of time they would *ideally* like to spend on each type of activity (Table 7.8).

Table 7.8. Mean percentage of time in a typical week spent by co-ordinators on each of a variety of activities (Actual %), mean percentage of time that co-ordinators would ideally like to spend on each activity (Ideal %), and results of paired sample *t-tests* (*p*-values) between ideal and actual percentages for 2000/2001 (*N*=18) and 1997/98 (*N*=23).

Co-ordinator activities		**Actual %* Mean (*SD*)**	**Ideal %* Mean (*SD*)**	***df* ; *p***
Home visits	**2000/2001**	**18.9% (9.4)**	**23.4% (8.5)**	***df*=17; *p*<.05**
	1997/98	14.2% (10.1)	24.9% (9.9)	*df*=22; *p*<.001
Releasing teachers for home visits	**2000/2001**	**0.2% (0.6)**	**4.3% (5.6)**	***df*=17; *p*<.01**
	1997/98	0.4% (0.95)	1.9% (2.1)	*df*=22; *p*<.005
Devising / implementing extra-curricular activities for pupils	**2000/2001**	**6.6% (5.7)**	**6.5% (5.2)****	***df*=17; *ns***
	1997/98	10.2% (7.4)	10.2% (5.0)	*df*=22; *ns*
Assisting with the development / review of a school plan	**2000/2001**	**1.8% (2.1)*****	**4.1% (3.8)**	***df*=17; *p*<.05**
	1997/98	4.0% (3.9)	6.4% (4.4)	*df*=22; *p*<.01
Working with parents to enable them to support their children's educational needs	**2000/2001**	**7.7% (6.8)**	**14.7% (9.5)**	***df*=17; *p*<.001**
	1997/98	11.3% (7.6)	16.6% (7.5)	*df*=22; *p*<.001
Preparing materials for use by teachers	**2000/2001**	**2.4% (3.2)**	**4.5% (4.8)**	***df*=17; *ns***
	1997/98	4.3% (5.8)	4.9% (5.1)	*df*=22; *ns*
Working with teachers to identify their in-career development needs	**2000/2001**	**1.3% (1.7)*****	**3.2% (2.6)****	***df*=17; *p*<.01**
	1997/98	5.4% (5.0)	6.3% (4.3)	*df*=22; *ns*
Advising on use of new and existing teaching resources	**2000/2001**	**2.1% (3.3)**	**3.1% (4.2)****	***df*=17; *ns***
	1997/98	4.4% (5.0)	4.6% (2.6)	*df*=22; *ns*
Remedial work with pupils	**2000/2001**	**25.5% (17.5)**	**13.9% (14.8)**	***df*=17; *p*<.001**
	1997/98	30.2% (17.8)	13.5% (8.8)	*df*=21; *p*<.001
School administrative tasks	**2000/2001**	**1.1% (2.5)**	**0.9% (1.7)**	***df*=17; *ns***
	1997/98	3.2% (3.8)	1.8% (2.2)	*df*=22; *ns*
Administrative tasks specific to your work as co-ordinator	**2000/2001**	**7.6% (8.3)**	**6.6% (4.7)**	***df*=17; *ns***
	1997/98	6.5% (8.0)	8.4% (5.2)	*df*=22; *ns*
Self-esteem work with pupils****		19.4% (15.6)	17.2% (10.4)	*df*=17; *ns*
Substitution for absent teachers****		0.7% (1.6)	0.3% (0.83)	*df*=17; *ns*
Other (e.g., managing equipment libraries)		1.2% (2.8)	1.6% (3.4)	*df*=17; *ns*

* Percentages do not sum to 100% as co-ordinators may engage in activities that are not listed.
** *Mann-Whitney* test revealed a significant difference (*p<0.05*) between the 1997/98 Ideal% and the 2000/2001 Ideal%.
*** *Mann-Whitney* test revealed a significant difference (*p<0.05*) between the 1997/98 Actual% and the 2000/2001 Actual %.
****No comparison possible as these response categories were added for 2000/2001 questionnaire.

An examination of the average actual and ideal percentages furnished by co-ordinators highlights not only the activities to which most time is devoted, but also cases where there is a large discrepancy between the actual amount of time and the amount of time perceived as ideal.

As was the case in 1997/98, remedial work with pupils still occupied the highest percentage (25.5%) of co-ordinators' time (Table 7.8). Furthermore, there was little change since 1997/98 in the collectively suggested ideal for this activity (13.9%). Even though the proportion of time spent on remedial work had decreased by 4.7% since 1997/98, there remained a significant discrepancy between the actual and ideal percentages suggested. The second most time-consuming activity for co-ordinators was self-esteem work with pupils, which occupied almost one-fifth (19.4%) of co-ordinators' working week. However, the amount of time spent on this activity was consistent with the ideal suggested time (17.2%).

While the average percentage of time co-ordinators devoted to home visits had increased by 4.6% over the last three years, it was still significantly less than the suggested ideal (23.4%). In addition to conducting home visits themselves, co-ordinators spent an average of 0.2% of their week *releasing teachers* for home visits, which was significantly less than the suggested ideal (4.3%). A significant difference was also found between the mean amount of time allocated to working with parents in 2000/2001 (7.7%) and the collectively suggested ideal (14.7%).

In 2000/2001, there was a significant decrease in the amount of time spent working on the school plan (1.8%), resulting in a significant difference between the ideal and actual percentages suggested for this activity in 2000/2001. Time spent working with teachers to identify their incareer development needs (1.3%) had also decreased significantly in 2000/2001. Despite a corresponding decrease in the suggested ideal time for this activity, there remained a significant difference between ideal and actual percentages.

A smaller proportion of co-ordinators' time was allocated to other activities, including preparing materials for use by teachers (7.7%), substituting for absent teachers (0.7%), performing school administrative tasks (1.1%), and scheme-specific administrative work (7.6%). As was the case in 1997/98, the differences between the actual and ideal percentages furnished by co-ordinators for these activities in 2000/2001 are not significant.

Overall, an examination of the *ideal* percentages furnished by co-ordinators suggests that their main priorities have remained somewhat stable since 1997/98, with home visits remaining the activity to which they would ideally devote the most time. Self-esteem work with pupils also appeared to be a priority activity, although this category is new to the 2000/2001 questionnaire and as such cannot be compared to 1997/98 responses. Consistent with the trend in 1997/98, the mean suggested ideal time for work with parents was slightly higher than the mean ideal time for remedial work with pupils, followed by administrative tasks specific to co-ordinators' work.

There was a significant decrease between 1997/98 and 2000/2001 in the suggested ideal time for the following three activities: working with teachers to identify incareer training needs (6.1% and 3.2% respectively); organising extra-curricular activities for pupils (10.2% vs. 6.5%); and advising on the use of new and existing teaching resources (4.6% vs. 3.1%). These results seem to indicate that co-ordinators continuously re-evaluated their priorities as the scheme evolved.

With regard to the figures for the *actual* percentage of time spent on various activities, it would appear that the trends are similar to 1997/98, with co-ordinators spending a large proportion of time doing remedial work, despite the fact that home visits remain their ideal priority. Indeed, that there are still significant differences between the actual and the ideal percentages furnished for 6 of the 14 activities indicates the need for more planning and communication where co-ordinators' daily activities are concerned.

In a related question, co-ordinators were asked, in the event of their actual and ideal working week being dissimilar, to indicate the main reasons for the disparity. The results indicate that over the last three years there has been little change in the top three factors which adversely affect co-ordinators' work. Both in 1997/98 and 2000/2001, the vast majority of co-ordinators (96% and 94.5%, respectively) agreed that time restrictions were the most constraining factor in their work (Table 7.9). Furthermore, 84% in 1997/98 and 82.3% in 2000/2001 agreed that lack of flexibility in working hours adversely affected their work. The lack of space remained the third most cited reason for the disparity in 2000/2001 (76.4%). Seven co-ordinators (41.1%) also reported that financial considerations were a problem. Indeed, these results imply that little has been done to address some of the more practical concerns raised by co-ordinators in 1997/98.

Eight co-ordinators (47.1%) also agreed that time spent dealing with the concerns of school staff was problematic, and 41.1% felt that principal opposition was an obstacle. That over one-third of co-ordinators agreed that interpersonal factors impacted negatively on their work is surprising given the findings that there were fewer discrepancies between the co-ordinators' and staff members' perceptions of the co-ordinators' role. These results suggest that while, for the most part, co-ordinators and school staff have reached a mutual understanding, there remain some sources of contention and perhaps more inservice for school staff would be useful. According to one co-ordinator:

> Inservice days equivalent to those which co-ordinators receive *must* be made available to principals and teachers in order for them to fully understand the co-ordinator's role…

Conversely, there was a slight decrease in the number of co-ordinators (5.9%) who agreed that parental opposition was a problem. The number of co-ordinators (23.6%) who reported a lack of access to resources such as photocopiers and telephones also decreased by over a half since 1997/98.

Table 7.9. Numbers and percentages of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 indicating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that various factors contributed to the disparity between their actual and ideal working week.

Disparity exist due to…..	**Strongly agree**	**Agree**	**Unsure**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
Time constraints (*N*=18)	14 (77.8%)	3 (16.7%)	-	1 (5.6%)	-
Lack of flexibility in working hours (*N*=17)	10 (58.8%)	4 (23.5%)	1 (5.9%)	2 (11.8%)	-
Financial considerations (*N*=17)	3 (17.6%)	4 (23.5%)	2 (11.8%)	7 (41.2%)	1 (5.9%)
Parental opposition (*N*=17)	-	1 (5.9%)	3 (17.6%)	8 (47.1%)	5 (29.4%)
Too much time spent dealing with concerns of principals and teachers (*N*=17)	2 (11.8%)	6 (35.3%)	2 (11.8%)	3 (17.6%)	4 (23.5%)
Lack of access to resources (*N*=17)	2 (11.8%)	2 (11.8%)	-	9 (52.9%)	4 (23.5%)
Lack of space (*N*=17)	10 (58.8%)	3 (17.6%)	1 (5.9%)	3 (17.6%)	-
One or more principals disagree with your methods (*N*=17)	3 (17.6%)	4 (23.5%)	3 (17.6%)	3 (17.6%)	4 (23.5%)
Other (*N*=2)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	-	-	-

In a related item, co-ordinators were required to indicate the extent to which they believed each of a variety of factors contributed to, or hindered, the success of *Breaking the Cycle* in the schools in their cluster (Table 7.10).

Table 7.10. Numbers and percentages of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 indicating the extent to which each of a variety of factors contributed to, or hindered, the success of *Breaking the Cycle* in the schools in their cluster.

	Contributed greatly	**Contributed somewhat**	**No effect / unsure**	**Hindered somewhat**	**Hindered greatly**
Level of support from principals (*N*=17)	11 (61.1%)	2 (11.1%)	3 (16.7%)	1 (5.6%)	-
Level of support from teachers (*N*=17)	8 (47.1%)	6 (35.3%)	1 (5.9%)	2 (11.8%)	-
Level of support from Department of Education and Science (*N*=17)	2 (11.8%)	7 (41.2%)	4 (23.5%)	2 (11.8%)	2 (11.8%)
Flexibility of working hours (*N*=18)	3 (16.7%)	2 (11.1%)	4 (22.2%)	6 (33.3%)	3 (16.7%)
Pupils' response to scheme (*N*=17)	13 (76.5%)	4 (23.5%)	-	-	-
Parental response to scheme (*N*=17)	13 (76.5%)	3 (17.6%)	1 (5.9%)	-	-
Availability of facilities (*N*=18)	6 (33.3%)	4 (22.2%)	3 (16.7%)	5 (27.8%)	-
Availability of funding (*N*=18)	11 (61.1%)	4 (22.2%)	2 (11.1%)	1 (5.6%)	-
Co-ordinator training (*N*=18)	10 (55.6%)	7 (38.9%)	1 (5.6%)	-	-
Co-ordinator workload (*N*=18)	1 (5.6%)	1 (5.6%)	1 (5.6%)	9 (50.0%)	6 (33.3%)
Overall administration of the scheme (*N*=18)	2 (11.8%)	8 (47.1%)	2 (11.8%)	3 (17.6%)	2 (11.8%)
Other (e.g., level of support from Inspectorate) (*N*=7)	-	-	-	-	7

Agreement was unanimous among co-ordinators, both in 1997/98 and in 2000/2001, that pupils' response to the scheme had contributed to its success. Similarly, the vast majority of co-ordinators reported that the level of support from principals, teachers and parents had contributed to success (72%, 82.4%, and 94.1%, respectively). Over half of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 also felt that support from the Department of Education and Sciences had contributed to the success of the scheme, though it appears that more consultation is required in this area, as almost one-quarter also reported that the level of support from the Department hindered the scheme.

As was the case in 1997/98, half of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 said that flexibility of working hours hindered the effectiveness of the scheme, while a further 83.3% felt that co-ordinator workload was a problem. And while the majority (55.5%) indicated that availability of facilities had contributed to the success of the scheme, a quarter still felt that lack of facilities was an obstacle. These percentages, combined with the concerns relating to time constraints and lack of space which were raised in the previous item (Table 7.9), provide further evidence that some of the practical concerns of co-ordinators still need to be addressed.

It appears, however, that some of the overall administrative problems have been resolved, as there was a sizeable increase in the percentage of co-ordinators who felt that the overall administration of the scheme had contributed to its success (20.0% in 1997/98 vs. 58.9% in 2000/2001). The availability of funding and co-ordinator training were also seen by the majority of co-ordinators (83.3%, and 94.5%, respectively) as contributing to the success of the scheme.

7.2 CO-ORDINATORS' VIEWS ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF *BREAKING THE CYCLE*

In several related items, co-ordinators were asked for their own views on the administration of *Breaking the Cycle*. An open-ended item invited co-ordinators to make any comments, positive or negative, about the administration of the scheme. Responses to this item tended to be negative (Table 7.11).

Table 7.11. Number and percentage of co-ordinators (*N*=17*) commenting on various aspects of the administration of *Breaking the Cycle* scheme.

Type of response	**Number**	**%**
Greater support / direction needed from Department and Inspectorate / Department should listen to the needs of co-ordinators.	6	35.3%
Co-ordinators not adequately informed about progress and future of the scheme	4	23.5%
More inservice needed for principals, teachers and Inspectorate	3	17.6%
Co-ordinators not consulted on the arrangement of clusters or on the working conditions of the *New Programme*	3	17.6%
Co-ordinators should have their own office / space from which they can work	3	17.6%
Other (e.g., payment of expenses delayed)	19	-

*Numbers sum to greater than 17 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

Six respondents (35.3%) called for greater involvement and support from the Inspectorate and the Department of Education and Science, while three indicated that more inservice was needed for school staff and the Inspectorate. For example, one co-ordinator wrote:

> I would have preferred more 'following' or a call for more accountability from principals/staffs…I arranged many cluster meetings. When local inspector was involved or national co-ordinator (was) visiting 100% attendance, otherwise attendance was poor…

Three co-ordinators also remarked on the lack of consultation with regard to changes in cluster compositions, and a further three pointed to the need for more work space. Other comments included some general suggestions, as well as some positive comments. For example, one co-ordinator stated:

> *Breaking the Cycle* is a great scheme. It began with a lot of teething problems, mainly because the job description was so wide. In my cluster, staffs and the co-ordinator got together and worked it out and everyone benefited greatly from it…

Co-ordinators were asked several questions about the availability and deployment of extra funding under the scheme. First, they were asked to indicate who had primary responsibility in the schools in their cluster for deciding how the Special Projects Grant was spent. Only one co-ordinator had sole responsibility for deciding how the grant was spent (Table 7.12). Generally, co-ordinators said that while they had primary responsibility for the grant, they chose to consult with principals (33.3%) or principals and teachers (33.3%). As one co-ordinator remarked:

> I always make sure to discuss expenditure with principals and invite suggestions from class teachers as they know children best of all.

Table 7.12. Number and percentage of co-ordinators specifying the various agents involved in deciding how the Special Projects Grant was spent in the schools in their cluster (*N*=18*).

Decision was made by…	**Number**	**%**
Co-ordinator and principal (varying degrees of consultation)	6	33.3%
Co-ordinator, principal and teachers together	6	33.3%
Staff in school have responsibility for how grant is spent	2	11.1%
Co-ordinator has sole responsibility (i.e., does not consult with others)	1	5.6%
All members of staff (including co-ordinator) as well as parents	1	5.6%
Other: (e.g., "Depends on school. Some principals would demand more of a say".)	3	16.7%

*Numbers sum to greater than 18 as one respondent gave more than one response.

Co-ordinators were subsequently asked for any comments they might have on the manner in which the Special Projects Grant was spent. All co-ordinators responded to this question, and ten provided more than one comment. Eight co-ordinators (44.4%) felt that the funding had been well

spent, while four made negative comments about how the funding was spent. For example, one co-ordinator wrote:

> In the rural area, transport is always a big expense. In general, the funding is well spent and it is unfortunate that so much must be spent sometimes on transport.

Another co-ordinator noted that:

> The extra-curricular activities are becoming less extra-curricular and happening more in school time. I find that staff want drama, music during the school day and I don't have much left for community-based activities.

A further four co-ordinators (22.2%) said that they would like more money to be spent on parental courses and extra-curricular activities, while two co-ordinators felt that more funding in general was needed. Four co-ordinators (22.2%) also made more general observations, for example, noting that pupils had benefited from the scheme. Ten responses were categorised as 'other', and included comments like the one below:

> Principals are still interested in spending a lot of money on swimming and music- while these are necessary skills I feel that we should look to developing other areas.

As was the case in 1997/98, co-ordinators were less informed about how the extra capitation grant had been spent, with 29.4% reporting that they didn't know how the grant was spent (Table 7.13). However, eight co-ordinators (47.1%) felt that the funding was well spent, and four (23.5%) reported that children's needs were taken into account. Two co-ordinators (11.8%) also indicated that spending was well spread across all curriculum areas, with one co-ordinator writing:

> English was tackled in all schools over the last number of years. Computer software has also been purchased. Generally a good balance has existed in all curriculum areas.

In contrast, one respondent, who was critical of how the funding was being spent, stated:

> I feel that the junior end in one of my schools gets very little and as a rule the infant department is neglected in all schools.

Overall, however, it appears that there is little contention regarding the deployment of the extra funding under the scheme, as the most common response among co-ordinators was that both the Special Project Grant and the extra capitation grant were well spent.

Table 7.13. Number and percentage of co-ordinators (*N*=17*) expressing various general comments regarding how the 2000/2001 extra capitation grant is being spent in the schools in their cluster.

Response	**Number**	**%**
Feel funding is well spent (general comment)	8	47.1%
I don't know how the grant is being spent	5	29.4%
Children's needs taken into account / children benefiting from it	4	23.5%
Spending well spread across all curriculum areas	2	11.8%
Other	3	17.6%

*Numbers sum to greater than 17 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

The 2000/2001 questionnaire included an additional item, which asked co-ordinators if they had access to the necessary resources to fulfil their role. While eight co-ordinators (47.1%) felt that they had, five (29.4%) were unsure, and almost a quarter (23.5%) felt that they did not. When invited to give a reason for their answer, over a quarter reported that resources were adequate and that materials were made available to them when necessary (Table 7.14). However, two co-ordinators said they required more funding, and six that they needed more space.

Table 7.14. Number and percentage of co-ordinators (*N*=18*) expressing various general comments regarding their access, or lack of access, to the necessary resources to fulfil their role as co-ordinator.

Type of response	**Number**	**%**
Need own office / space (e.g., to run parents courses)	6	33.3%
Principals and teachers are supportive / make materials and resources (e.g., photocopier, phone etc.) available to me when need arises	4	22.2%
Resources are adequate	3	16.7%
More funding needed	2	11.1%
Other (e.g., do not have access to all information that comes to schools, such as circulars, etc).	6	33.3%

*Numbers sum to greater than 18 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

7.3 INSERVICE TRAINING

A large majority of co-ordinators (88.9%) agreed that they had learned a great deal from the inservice training provided for co-ordinators (Table 7.15).

Table 7.15. Number and percentage of co-ordinators expressing varying levels of agreement that they had learned a great deal from the inservice training provided for them.

***I have learned a great deal from the Breaking the Cycle incareer development courses which were made available to co-ordinators* (*N*=18)**				
Strongly agree	**Agree**	**Unsure**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
n=9 (50%)	*n*=7 (38.9%)	*n*=2 (11.1%)	-	-

More co-ordinators in 2000/2001 than in 1997/98 indicated that all, or most, principals believed that their attendance at incareer development courses benefited the school (32% in 1997/98 vs. 52.9% in 2000/2001) (Table 7.16).

A similar picture emerged in relation to teachers, with the majority of co-ordinators (55.6%) reporting that all, or most, teachers recognised the value of the inservice training. These results indicate that while there is still scepticism among some principals and teachers regarding co-ordinators' incareer development, in general the majority of school staff recognise that it is beneficial to their school.

Table 7.16. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 1997/98 and 2000/2001 indicating whether all, most, a few, or no, principals and teachers believe that the attendance of co-ordinators at inservice has benefited their school.

***In your opinion, what proportion of** principals **in your cluster believe that your attendance at incareer development courses has benefited their school?* (*N*=17)**				
	All	**Most**	**Some**	**Very few / none**
2000/2001	***n*=4 (23.5%)**	***n*=5 (29.4%)**	***n*=8 (47.1%)**	**-**
1997/98	*n=2* (8.0%)	*n=6* (24.0%)	*n=14* (56.0%)	*n=3* (12.0%)
***In your opinion, what proportion of** teachers **in your cluster believe that your attendance at incareer development courses has benefited their school?* (*N*=18)**				
	All	**Most**	**Some**	**Very few / none**
2000/2001	***n*=3 (16.7%)**	***n*=7 (38.9%)**	***n*=7 (38.9%)**	***n*=1 (5.6%)**
1997/98	*n=2* (8.3%)	*n=5* (20.8%)	*n*=15 (62.5%)	*n*=2 (8.3%)

Co-ordinators were asked if they had any comments regarding the content or organisation of their incareer development courses. Responses to this open-ended item were assigned to categories, and any comment type which occurred only once was assigned to the 'other' category (Table 7.17).

The majority of co-ordinators (82.4%) provided positive feedback on the content of the courses, although three (17.7%) felt that the content was more relevant to co-ordinators from alternative schemes (e.g., The Home-School-Community Liaison programme co-ordinators). Co-ordinators also felt that the courses allowed them to meet other co-ordinators (11.8%) and provided an opportunity to express their opinions (11.8%).

Other comments (*n*=11) varied, with co-ordinators reporting, for example, that the courses helped them to cope in difficult situations. Still others provided mixed responses, combining positive feedback with suggestions for improving the courses. Three examples of such 'other' comments are:

> …Inservice gave me a great insight into the whole area of disadvantage. It certainly is necessary for increased motivation and renewed enthusiasm.
>
> The courses were of great benefit but not enough time was given.
>
> I found the incareer development courses very good and would love to be able to further my studies through home study courses. Distance from Dublin (Marino) is prohibitive so we…are still disadvantaged- bring amenities to us by post.

Table 7.17. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 expressing various general comments on the inservice provided for *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinators (*N*=17*).

Type of response	**Number**	**%**
Content excellent / very good / informative /practical	14	82.4%
Great to meet other co-ordinators / provide support / reduces isolation	2	11.8%
Opportunity to express opinions	2	11.8%
Content more relevant to HSCL co-ordinators / Lack of understanding of our role	3	17.7%
Other (e.g., guest speakers greatly enhanced the service)	11	61.1%

*Numbers sum to greater than 17 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response

Co-ordinators were given an opportunity to suggest up to three additional topics that they would like to see addressed in the incareer development courses for co-ordinators. Responses were ordered into six different categories, based on the type of content suggested (Table 7.18). Over three quarters of respondents (77.8%) recommended additional 'personal development' topics, for example stress management courses. A majority (61.1%) also wished to see practical/interpersonal topics, such as leadership and networking skills, addressed. One-sixth of respondents recommended that courses addressing financial matters, for example grant management, be added, and a further 11.1% hoped that content specific to the co-ordinators' job would be expanded upon. Finally 38.9% of respondents suggested general topics that were difficult to classify, such as 'teaching of pupils during morning times' and 'whole school policy on development'.

Table 7.18. Additional topics, suggested by co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*N*=18*), to be addressed in future incareer development courses for co-ordinators.

Suggested topics	**Numbers**
Personal development: (e.g., Stress management, time management, self-esteem)	*n*=14 (77.8%)
Practical/interpersonal skills: (e.g., Programme management, facilitation skills, leadership, managing cluster meetings, partnership, networking, conflict management, counselling, social work skills)	*n*=11 (61.1%)
Parenting courses: (e.g., Models of home school links / parental visits, involvement in school planning)	*n*=5 (27.8%)
Financial courses/information: (e.g., Expenditure, grant management, organisations where we can obtain financial help etc.)	*n*=3 (16.7%)
Co-ordinator specific topics: (e.g., Job specification)	*n*=2 (11.1%)
Other topics: (e.g., Teaching of pupils during morning times, time for co-ordinators to present what they do, whole school policy on development, etc).	*n*=7 (38.9%)

*Numbers sum to greater than 18 as respondents were permitted to give up to three responses.

7.4 WORK WITH PUPILS AND PARENTS

This section is concerned with the effects of the scheme on pupils, and the co-ordinators' work with parents. There was unanimous agreement among co-ordinators in 2000/2001 that the scheme was of benefit to participating marginalised pupils. Co-ordinators provided a variety of reasons.

As can be seen in Table 7.19, the three most popular responses in 2000/2001 related to pupils' increased exposure to a variety of activities as a result of the scheme. A quarter of respondents also said that increased parental involvement had benefited marginalised children, while 22.2% made a general positive comment. For example, one co-ordinator noted:

…they have seen the school does care about their welfare and their future.

Additional reasons included availability of more resources that pupils could bring home (22.2%), extra finances available to the school (16.7%), improved home-school links (16.7%), and extra attention at school (11.1%).

Table 7.19. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 giving a variety of reasons for agreeing that marginalised pupils have benefited from participating in *Breaking the Cycle* (*N*=18*).

Response	**Number**	**%**
Improved self-esteem / self-confidence as a result of various out-of-school activities (e.g., workshops drama, music, sport skills)	7	38.9%
Out-of-school activities not possible without *BTC* (general comment)	7	38.9%
Broader curriculum / greater exposure to the arts and theatre	7	38.9%
Parents taking greater interest in their children's education / resources to support their children education	5	27.8%
General positive comment (e.g., "Marginalised pupils in the school have benefited greatly in many ways").	4	22.2%
Benefited greatly from bringing educational games / resources home	4	22.2%
Extra resources / materials / finance available	3	16.7%
Parental involvement in various schemes (e.g., shared reading schemes, after school clubs) beneficial / school	3	16.7%
Improved home-school links (e.g., parents find it easier to come to school, parents and pupils more receptive to home visits from co-ordinator)	3	16.7%
Pupils received extra attention (small group work / one-to-one tuition)	2	11.1%
Improvement in academic achievements / reading	2	11.1%
Other (e.g., homework clubs)	14	77.8%

* Numbers sum to greater than 18 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

Co-ordinators were asked to give an indication of the number of teachers they perceived to have changed their attitudes towards marginalised pupils as a result of *Breaking the Cycle* (Table 7.20).

Table 7.20. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 indicating whether all, most, a few, or no teachers have changed their attitudes towards marginalised pupils as a result of *Breaking the Cycle* (*N*=18).

Year	**All**	**Most**	**A few**	**None**
2000/2001	***n*=3 (16.7%)**	***n*=11 (61.1%)**	***n*=4 (22.2%)**	***n*=0 -**
1997/98	*n*=3 (12.5%)	*n*=9 (37.5%)	*n*=11 (45.8%)	*n*=1 (4.2%)

While four (22.2%) felt that only a few teachers had changed their attitudes, most co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*n*=14) reported that all, or most, teachers had. The fact that the modal response shifted from 'a few' in 1997/98 to 'most' in 2000/2001, suggests that the scheme is having a positive impact on teachers' attitudes.

Co-ordinators were invited to elaborate on why they felt teachers' attitudes towards marginalised pupils had changed. The top three reasons mentioned, namely that teachers had gained a better understanding of disadvantage (55.6%), that teachers recognized the importance of parental involvement in their children's education (27.8%), and that teachers believed that the scheme could help marginalised pupils (16.7%), were consistent with the most popular responses given in 1997/98 (Table 7.21).

Table 7.21. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*N*=18*) giving various reasons for agreeing that teachers have changed their attitudes towards marginalised pupils since the introduction of *Breaking the Cycle*.

Response	**Number**	**%**
Better understanding and awareness of disadvantage and children's home situation / how this affects pupils behaviour in the classroom (such as problems with homework)	10	55.6%
Teachers see importance of parental involvement in children's education/ support home visitations	5	27.8%
Belief that scheme can help marginalised pupils / teachers' concerns for their pupils can be addressed	3	16.7%
Teachers are more conscious of the needs of marginalised pupils	2	11.1%
Other (e.g., they are beginning to look at the 'whole child' as opposed to the subject and the curriculum)	9	50.0%

*Numbers sum to greater than 18 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

Co-ordinators were asked a series of questions about their visits to the homes of the pupils in their cluster. The mean percentage of homes visited since the beginning of the school year in 2000/2001 was 47.1% (Table 7.22). While the number of homes visited appears to have decreased by 20.5% since 1997/98, the discrepancy between 1997/98 and 2000/2001 may be a result of the wording of the question, rather than a decrease in the actual percentage. While the 1997/98 questionnaire asked 'what percentage of homes of pupils in your cluster have you visited?', the 2000/2001 questionnaire specified 'what percentage of homes of pupils in your cluster have you visited *since the beginning of the current school year'*. Thus, the 1997/98 figures may refer to a longer period of time, namely from January 1997 (when co-ordinators commenced work) until June 1998 (when the first questionnaire was returned).

Table 7.22. Mean percentage of homes of pupils in cluster that had been visited by co-ordinators in 1997/98 (*N*=25) and in 2000/2001 (*N*=17).

	1997/98	**2000/2001**
Mean	67.6%	47.1%
SD	20.2	24.26
Range	85	86
Mode	75	30*

*Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown.

As Table 7.23 demonstrates, there was wide variation between co-ordinators in the percentage of homes visited in 2000/2001, with the total percentage varying from 9% to 95%.

Table 7.23. Co-ordinators (*N*=17) estimates of the percentage of pupils' homes in cluster visited during 2000/2001 (percentages and frequencies).

% of homes visited	No. of Co-ordinators	% of co-ordinators	Cumulative %
9%	1	5.9%	5.9
15%	1	5.9%	11.8
20%	1	5.9%	17.7
25%	1	5.9%	23.6
30%	2	11.7%	35.3
35%	1	5.9%	41.2
45%	2	11.7%	52.9
50%	1	5.9%	58.8
55%	1	5.9%	64.7
60%	1	5.9%	70.6
66%	1	5.9%	76.5
70%	1	5.9%	82.4
75%	2	11.7%	94.1
95%	1	5.9%	100.0
Mean = 47.1%	***N*=17**	**100%**	**100%**

The average percentage of *marginalised* pupils' homes visited was somewhat higher, at 65.8% (Table 7.24). As was the case with the last item, the apparent discrepancy between the 2000/2001 and 1997/98 results may be due to the wording of the questionnaire item and does not necessarily indicate a true decrease in the number of marginalised pupils' homes visited in 2000/2001.

Table 7.24. Mean percentage of homes of marginalised pupils in cluster co-ordinators had visited in 1997/98 (*N*=25) and in 2000/2001 (*N*=18).

	1997/98	**2000/2001**
Mean	81.6%	65.8%
SD	21.1	33
Range	90	89
Mode	90	100

In comparison to the total percentage of homes visited in 2000/2001 (47.1%), it would seem that the marginalised families were specially targeted, which is consistent with the objectives of *Breaking the Cycle*. However, while 12 co-ordinators (66.7%) had visited 50% or more of marginalised pupils' homes, Table 7.25 indicates that one in three co-ordinators had *not* visited the homes of a significant number of disadvantaged pupils in their cluster. It is possible that co-

ordinators had intended to do more home visits following completion of the questionnaire, as the questionnaire deadline was two months before the end of the school year. Nevertheless, the results are similar to those collected in 1997/98, suggesting that a large number of marginalised pupils' homes may not receive home visits from co-ordinators. Furthermore, these figures are consistent with the findings that the amount of time co-ordinators actually spent on home visits was much less than the proportion of time they would have liked to devote to this activity (see Table 7.8).

Table 7.25. Co-ordinators (*N*=18) estimates of the percentage of marginalised pupils' homes in cluster visited during 2000/2001 (percentages and frequencies).

% of homes visited	No. of Co-ordinators	% of co-ordinators	Cumulative %
11%	1	5.6%	5.6%
15%	1	5.6%	11.1%
18%	1	5.6%	16.7%
30%	1	5.6%	22.2%
40%	1	5.6%	27.8%
45%	1	5.6%	33.3%
50%	1	5.6%	38.9%
60%	1	5.6%	44.4%
65%	1	5.6%	50%
75%	1	5.6%	55.6%
90%	1	5.6%	61.1%
92%	1	5.6%	66.7%
95%	1	5.6%	72.2%
99%	1	5.6%	77.8%
100%	4	22.4%	100%
Mean=65.83%	***N*=18**	**100%**	**100%**

The views of co-ordinators on the usefulness of home visits are identical to those in 1997/98, with unanimous agreement that visiting pupils' homes was a useful exercise, although 28% thought it only 'somewhat' useful (Table 7.26). Similarly, all co-ordinators thought that parents appreciated their visits, even though 27.8% thought parents appreciated it only 'somewhat'.

Table 7.26. Numbers and percentages of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*N*=18) indicating the extent to which they believe home visits to be a useful exercise, and indicating the extent to which parents appreciated home visits.

Do you believe that visiting pupils' homes was a useful exercise?				
Very much so	**Somewhat**	**Unsure**	**Not really**	**Not at all**
n=13 (72.2%)	*n*=5 (27.8%)	-	-	-
Do you think that most parents appreciated you visiting their homes?				
Very much so	**Somewhat**	**Unsure**	**Not really**	**Not at all**
n=13 (72.2%)	*n*=5 (27.8%)	-	-	-

Co-ordinators were subsequently asked to rate the importance of each of a variety of factors in making the decision to visit homes (Table 7.27).

Table 7.27. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001indicating the importance of each of a variety of factors in influencing their decision to visit the homes of marginalised pupils (*N*=18).

Reason was to…	Extremely Important	Somewhat important	Unsure	Not very important	Not at all important
Discuss issues related to children	12 (66.7%)	6 (33.3%)	-	-	-
Involve parents more in school activities	14 (77.8%)	3 (16.7%)	1 (5.6%)	-	-
Provide general support for families	15 (83.3%)	3 (16.7%)	-	-	-
Establish a relationship with parents	18 (100%)	-	-	-	-
Other (e.g., to discuss setting up initiatives)	6 (33.3%)	-	-	-	-

There was unanimous agreement that establishing a relationship with parents was an extremely important factor in their decision to visit marginalised pupils' homes. Furthermore, as was the case in 1997/98, all co-ordinators felt that discussing issues related to children, and providing general support for families were extremely, or somewhat, important factors influencing their decision, and 94.4% felt that it was important to involve parents in a wider variety of school activities. Six respondents elected to provide other reasons for home visits, for example, to discuss new initiatives.

When asked about the effect of the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme on parental involvement in children's education, the vast majority (88.9%) believed that the scheme had led to an increase in levels of involvement, with only two co-ordinators indicating that they were unsure (Table 7.28). Furthermore, 82.3% of co-ordinators agreed that the attitudes of parents who are uninterested in their children's education can be changed. The results seem promising, especially given that co-ordinators have consistently identified promotion of parental involvement and home visits as a priority activity. One co-ordinator chose not to respond to the question, stating:

> there are no disinterested parents- they all do their best within their capability level and really want their children to do well.

Table 7.28. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001indicating the extent of their agreement that *Breaking the Cycle* has led to greater parental involvement in their children's education, and that the attitudes of parents who are uninterested in their children's education can be changed.

***I believe that parents in my cluster have become more involved in their children's education as a result of Breaking the Cycle scheme* (*N*=18)**				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
n=5 (27.8%)	*n*=11 (61.1%)	*n*=2 (11.1%)	--	--
***To what extent do you agree that the attitudes of parents who are uninterested in their children's education can be changed? (*N*=16)**				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
n=4 (23.5%)	*n*=10 (58.8%)	*n*=2 (17.6%)	--	--

To build a better picture of the population served by the schools, co-ordinators were asked a series of questions about the families of the pupils in their clusters (Table 7.29).

Table 7.29. Co-ordinators' estimates (mean percentages and the minimum and maximum values) in 1997/98 and 2000/2001 of the percentage of pupils whose home background interferes with their ability to learn effectively, whose parents actively encourage and support their schoolwork, and whose parents have low educational expectations of their children.

Questionnaire item	**Year**	**Mean**	**Minimum and maximum values**
In your opinion, what is the percentage of pupils in your cluster whose home background seriously interferes with their ability to learn effectively? (*N*=16)	1997/98	31.4%	5%-100%
	2000/2001	34.3%	3% - 75%
In your opinion, what percentage of parents in your cluster* actively *encourages and supports their children in their schoolwork? (*N*=16)	1997/98	56.9%	5%-100%
	2000/2001	55.0%	15% - 95%
In your opinion, what percentage of parents in your cluster has low educational expectations of their children? (*N*=16)	1997/98	26.6%	0% - 70%
	2000/2001	32.6%	0% - 78%

The 2000/2001 results are similar to those from 1997/98, with co-ordinators stating that one-third of pupils in their cluster have home backgrounds that seriously interfere with their ability to learn effectively. However, the range of figures provided in both years varied widely, suggesting that there were differences between co-ordinators' perceptions of pupils' home backgrounds depending on their cluster.

In 1997/98, co-ordinators felt that 57% of parents in their cluster actively encouraged and supported their children in their schoolwork. A similar picture emerged in 2000/2001, with co-ordinators giving a mean figure of 55%. Again, the range of responses varied widely, with one respondent giving a figure of 15%, and two a figure of 95%.

In contrast, when asked what percentage of parents in their cluster had low educational expectations of their children, co-ordinators indicated a higher mean figure in 2000/2001 (32.6%) than in 1997/98 (26.6%). An analysis of the range of responses reveals that the majority of co-ordinators in both 1997/98 and 2000/2001 (55.6% and 50%, respectively) indicated that fewer than 25% of parents in their cluster had low educational expectations of their children. At the same time, one-quarter of co-ordinators in 2000/2001, compared to one in eight in 1997/98, thought that 50% or more of the parents in their cluster had low educational expectations of their children.

7.5 CO-ORDINATORS' GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE SCHEME

This section focuses on co-ordinators' views on the scheme in general. In two separate open-ended items, co-ordinators were asked to describe their single most positive and single most negative experience as a *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator, drawing on any aspect of their work. The responses to both items were extremely varied, and the positive and negative experiences were categorised for ease of reporting (Tables 7.30 and 7.31).

Table 7.30. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*N*=18*) expressing various general comments on their most positive experience as a *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator.

Type of response	**Number**	**%**
Work with pupils (general)/ progress among pupils (e.g., academic achievements, increased self-esteem)	5	27.8%
Positive change / progress with parents (e.g., helping parents access relevant services, increased involvement among uninvolved parents)	5	27.8%
Witnessing the reaction of children and parents to *BTC* activities / pupils and parents appreciating work	5	27.8%
Out-of-school activities with parents, pupils and teachers together (community spirit)	4	22.2%
Other	2	11.1%

*Numbers sum to greater than 18 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

The two most rewarding experiences cited by co-ordinators were those that related to their work with pupils (27.8%) and their work with parents (27.8%). Two examples of such comments are:

> On a home visit I introduced a 3 year-old to 'Postman Pat' (book) and now an older school-going sibling reads to the child each night. Mum has come to the parent/toddler group and brings home a book each time. This would be a marginalised family.

> Home visiting: Parents embraced this new role from their local school with great enthusiasm…

An additional five co-ordinators felt that witnessing the positive reaction of children and parents was gratifying. For example, one co-ordinator wrote:

> Response from students themselves has been most rewarding as in most cases the students have been very appreciative…

Four co-ordinators identified the improved community spirit amongst the members of the scheme as their most positive experience. For example, one co-ordinator said her best experience was:

> The setting up of the Theatre Group which involved twenty six parents in active roles. There was a great sense of community, new friendships were made and people were very co-operative.

Finally, two responses were categorised as 'other', and included:

> …Probably *most* significant is the thawing (out) of one very rigid principal who has come on board in this last year!

> …Teachers commenting on the fact that children look forward to the day I'm in the school because they'll get a new toy.

Responses to the item asking about co-ordinators' most negative experiences were similarly grouped into categories (Table 7.31).

Table 7.31. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*N*=18*) expressing various general comments on their most negative experience as a *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator.

Type of response	**No.**	**%**
Hostility / opposition / negativity towards the work of the co-ordinator from one / more principal (e.g., low educational expectations of principals for marginalised pupils)	4	22.2%
Hostility / opposition / negativity towards the work of the co-ordinator from one / more teacher (e.g., one teacher insulted me personally at a meeting)	2	11.1%
Lack of facilities (e.g., telephone) / resources / space in schools	2	11.1%
Lack of interest in suggestions made by co-ordinator for *BTC* activities (e.g., staff not interested in community based extracurricular activities)	2	11.1%
Having to deal with teachers concerns continually	2	11.1%
Lack of support / appreciation from Department or national co-ordinator	2	11.1%
Other (e.g., changes in travel expenses)	6	33.3%

*Numbers sum to greater than 18 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

The most common negative experience related to principals' negativity towards co-ordinators (22.2%). For example, one co-ordinator wrote:

> Most negative experience was my base principal requesting me to sign myself in and out timewise each week- I refused.

Two co-ordinators felt that the opposition or lack of support from teachers was negative, while another two reported that dealing with teachers' concerns continually was discouraging. In the words of one co-ordinator:

> Lack of support of a team…all class teachers expecting that I have the answers to every difficulty they encounter. This may be a compliment but it is a very lonely job at times- different location, people each day- and they forget to ask 'How are you' or 'How are things going in your job?'

Other negative experiences reported by co-ordinators related to lack of facilities (11.1%), lack of interest in their suggestions for *Breaking the Cycle* activities (11.1%), and a lack of support and appreciation from the Department of Education (11.1%).

Six co-ordinators also reported experiences which were classified as 'other'; for example:

> A parent felt that her child went to school to learn lessons- not to talk about feelings. I learned that I need to explain to parents the benefits of such 'lessons'.
>
> Failing to break part of the cycle with some of the children.

Co-ordinators were given an opportunity to make additional comments, if they desired, about the scheme as a whole. Sixteen volunteered one or more comments. Responses were categorised and are presented in Table 7.32.

Table 7.32. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*N*=16*) expressing additional general comments about the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme.

Comment	**Number**	**%**
Positive comment about scheme: New idea / dimension to primary education (in Ireland) / new way of looking at disadvantage / schools happy to be in scheme	8	50.0%
Enjoyed working as a co-ordinator / opportunity to work with marginalised pupils / interesting and varied work / learned from experience (personal comment about working as a co-ordinator)	6	37.5%
More support / respect needed from Department (e.g., need directors for co-ordinators at local level)	5	31.3%
Negative comment about scheme: Dissatisfaction among co-ordinators / high turnover / lack of facilities.	5	31.3%
Co-ordinators should be consulted in relation to the *New Programme/* other comment on *New Programme*	3	18.8%
Progress of scheme was slow initially / learning process / attitudes have changed	3	18.8%
Other (e.g., require more forums to allow co-ordinators to voice their concerns, inservice very beneficial)	21	-

*Numbers sum to greater than 16 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

The majority of co-ordinators recorded a positive comment of some kind, with 37.5% providing a positive comment about their work as co-ordinator. For example two co-ordinators wrote:

> An excellent learning experience, I learned to take the lows as well as the highs…
>
> feel privileged and grateful that I have the opportunity to work with the marginalised in my cluster…

Furthermore, half of the co-ordinators provided a positive comment about the scheme in general, as illustrated in the following comments:

> The scheme opened up a whole new dimension to primary education, finally giving the disadvantaged a voice or an opportunity at the very least. In rural areas, the students benefited hugely from the scheme but I wonder what damage would be done if current resources and personnel were withdrawn. A high input must be maintained so future classes receive an equal opportunity.
>
> Breaking the Cycle has been a positive breakthrough in education for rural Ireland- children are benefiting.
>
> Where co-ordinators receive support from principals and class teachers, the scheme is working extremely well and the difference in these schools compared to five years ago is phenomenal, a great success…

Three co-ordinators (18.8%) said that the scheme, while initially slow, was progressing well. In contrast, five made general negative comments about the scheme. For example, one co-ordinator wrote:

> I feel personally that *BTC* is considered as an optional extra. I still don't think it's included in the 'necessary' running of the school…when I was off on sick leave my principal said there was no need to employ a substitute. Attitudes are, if I'm there okay, but if not, I'm not missed!

Eight co-ordinators suggested improvements to the scheme, with five calling for more support from the Department of Education and Science, and three stating that co-ordinators should be consulted more often. For example:

> Co-ordinators need regional directors available to them.
>
> I would like to see more respect shown by the Department of Education and Science as we are all supposed to be members of a partnership…

Finally, 20 responses were classified as 'other' and included comments in which co-ordinators described specific initiatives that they had taken.

7.6 CO-ORDINATORS' JOB SATISFACTION

In response to some of the issues raised in the 1997/98 questionnaire, four additional items relating to co-ordinators' level of job satisfaction were included in the 2000/2001 questionnaire. The first item asked co-ordinators to indicate their level of agreement with various statements regarding their work (Table 7.33).

Table 7.33. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*N*=18) indicating their level of agreement with various statements regarding their work as a *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator.

Questionnaire item	**Strongly agree**	**Agree**	**Unsure**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
Overall, I enjoy my work as a *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator	*n*= 11 (61.1%)	*n*= 6 (33.3%)	*n*= 1 (5.6%)	-	-
My work gives me a sense of accomplishment	*n*= 8 (44.4%)	*n*= 10 (55.6%)	-	-	-
I feel that the work I carry out with pupils in my cluster is worthwhile	*n*= 14 (77.8%)	*n*= 3 (16.7%)	*n*= 1 (5.6%)	-	-
I feel that the work I carry out with parents in my cluster is worthwhile	*n*= 13 (72.2%)	*n*= 5 (27.8%)	-	-	-
I feel that the work I carry out with teachers in my cluster is worthwhile	*n*= 9 (50.0%)	*n*= 7 (38.9%)	*n*= 2 (11.1%)	-	-

The vast majority of co-ordinators (94.4%) reported that they enjoyed their work as a *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator, with almost two-thirds 'strongly agreeing' with the statement. There was also unanimous agreement that their work gave them a sense of accomplishment, and that the work carried out with parents in the cluster was worthwhile. Furthermore, almost all respondents felt

that their work with pupils in the cluster was worthwhile. All but two co-ordinators also strongly agreed, or agreed, that their work with teachers was worthwhile.

In contrast, when asked to rate the level of stress in their job, the vast majority of co-ordinators (83.3%) reported that their job was stressful, with two (11.1%) indicating that it was very stressful (Table 7.34). Two co-ordinators (11.1%) felt that their job was not very stressful, and only one co-ordinator rated the job as not at all stressful.

Table 7.34. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*N*=18) indicating whether their job is very, somewhat, not very, or not at all stressful.

Very stressful	Somewhat stressful	Not very stressful	Not at all stressful
n= 2 (11.1%)	*n*= 13 (72.2%)	*n*=2 (11.1%)	*n*= 1 (5.6%)

In a related item, co-ordinators were asked to rate the current level of morale in relation to their work as a co-ordinator individually, and as a group. Three-quarters (76.4%) rated their individual level of morale as high, with 17.6% (*n*=3) giving a rating of 'very high' (Table 7.35). Two co-ordinators were unsure of their individual morale level, while two felt that it was low.

Co-ordinators were less certain when judging the level of morale among co-ordinators as a group, with the majority (72.2%) indicating that they were unsure. Three co-ordinators (17.6%) felt that the level of morale among the group was low, while two (11.1%) perceived a high level of morale among all co-ordinators.

The high level of morale reported by individual respondents appears to be consistent with the results presented in Table 7.33, where most co-ordinators indicated a high level of enjoyment and a sense of accomplishment from their work. These results are somewhat surprising, as individual morale and job enjoyment were high despite co-ordinators reporting high stress levels. Given the high turnover amongst co-ordinators one might speculate that high levels of morale and enjoyment at work are not sufficient to buffer the effects of high levels of stress on the job.

Table 3.35. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 indicating whether the current level of morale, both individually and among co-ordinators as a group, is very high, high, low, or very low.

Questionnaire item	Very high	High	Unsure	Low	Very low
In relation to your work as co-ordinator, how would you rate your current level of morale? (*N*=17)	*n*= 3 (17.6%)	*n*= 10 (58.8%)	*n*= 2 (11.8%)	*n*= 2 (11.8%)	-
In your opinion, what is the current level of morale among rural Breaking the Cycle *co-ordinators as a group?* (*N*=18)	-	*n*= 2 (11.1%)	*n*= 13 (72.2%)	*n*= 3 (16.7%)	-

Co-ordinators were subsequently invited to suggest three aspects of their working life which they would change in order to improve job satisfaction and/or working conditions. Half of the co-ordinators recommended additional space for co-ordinators to work, while 44.4% suggested more flexibility in working hours (Table 7.36). These views are not surprising given responses to earlier items (Tables 7.9 and 7.10), in which the majority of co-ordinators indicated that time constraints and lack of flexibility in working hours contributed to the disparity between their actual and ideal working week and hindered the success of the scheme.

Other recommendations included the reduction of cluster sizes (27.8%), more inservice for principals and teachers (22.2%), clarification of co-ordinators' role by the Department of Education and Science (22.2%), and cutting the amount of time spent on remedial work and classroom supervision (22.2%). Increased communication and support from the Department of Education and Science, as well as extra resources and provision of a parents' room were also suggested by respondents (16.7%, 16.7%, and 11.1%, respectively). An additional eleven comments were categorised as 'other', as they were difficult to classify. For example:

School staff should be more supportive of the role of the co-ordinator.

Ensure co-ordinator has the handling of the monies.

Table 7.36. Number and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*N*=18*) providing various suggestions as to which aspects of their working life they would change to improve job satisfaction and/or working conditions among co-ordinators.

Type of response	**Number**	**%**
Office or space for co-ordinator to work	9	50.0%
More flexibility with working conditions / time in lieu for time spent working after hours / permission to attend conferences	8	44.4%
Fewer schools in each cluster	5	27.8%
More inservice for principals and teachers	4	22.2%
Department should clarify role of co-ordinator and emphasise importance of home visits / self-esteem work with parents and reduce expectations	4	22.2%
Less remedial work / substitution work / classroom supervision	4	22.2%
Better support from Department at local level / better communication / more cluster meetings	3	16.7%
Extra resources for co-ordinators (e.g., phone)	3	16.7%
Provision of parents' room	2	11.1%
Other (e.g., time for co-ordinators to do more self-esteem work with marginalised pupils)	11	61.1%

*Numbers sum to greater than 18 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

7.7 CO-ORDINATORS' COMMENTS ON *THE NEW PROGRAMME*

Two additional items concerning co-ordinators' views on the *New Programme* were included in the 2000/2001 questionnaire. First, co-ordinators were asked if the *New Programme* to tackle disadvantage at primary level had altered the composition of their cluster of schools, and if so, how the cluster had been affected.

Six co-ordinators (33.3%) indicated that their clusters had remained unchanged, while one was unsure. Of the 11 co-ordinators (61.1%) whose clusters had changed, one had gained an additional school, three had lost one or two schools but had gained a different one, two had lost one or two schools, and four had had their cluster split into two or three (Table 7.37).

Table 7.37. Number of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 whose cluster composition was altered as a result of the *New Programme* (*N*=11) indicating the nature of the changes to their cluster.

Cluster composition altered by:	**Number**
Existing cluster split into 2 / split into 3	*n*=4
Loss of one or two schools and gaining of one (which is some distance away)	*n*=3
Loss of one or two schools from cluster	*n*=2
Addition of one school	*n*=1
Cluster changed (unspecific)	*n*=1

In an open-ended question, co-ordinators were invited to make any additional comments about the *New Programme*. Comments tended to be negative rather than positive (Table 7.38).

Table 7.38. Numbers and percentage of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 (*N*=14*) expressing various general comments on the *New Programme.*

Type of response	**Number**	**%**
Not enough information on specifics of scheme (e.g., how it will work)	5	35.7%
No consultation with local co-ordinators about cluster composition	4	28.6%
Co-ordinators were not asked of their experiences or expertise when the programme was devised	4	28.6%
Inservice for principals and staff needed	2	14.3%
Other (e.g., composition of new cluster does not make sense; some small schools in the area not included, etc.)	8	57.1%

*Numbers sum to greater than 14 as respondents were permitted to give more than one response.

Of the 14 co-ordinators that responded to the item, four said that there had been no consultation with local co-ordinators about changes to cluster composition, four said that co-ordinators had not been asked for their experiences, and two suggested that inservice for principals and staff was needed. For example, one co-ordinator wrote:

> There is no clarity once again about how it will work, no consultation/ information sessions with Board of Management or principals, no discussion with co-ordinators even though it is our jobs and lives which are being disrupted without warning. It was <u>not</u> part of our original contract that we may have to move…When I was employed as a co-ordinator there was never a suggestion that clusters might change and my work load would be increased by about 70% which is what is now proposed…

Five co-ordinators (35.7%) also posed questions, such as "Will the base school remain the same?" and "Will schools in the existing scheme receive the same financial help as they do now?", suggesting that some co-ordinators had not received adequate information regarding the new scheme.

However, among the seven responses that were classified as 'other', there were a few positive comments. For example:

> I see the *New Programme* as a continuation of the *Breaking the Cycle* programme. I think that it is an ideal opportunity for the Department of Education and Science to become more involved with the *New Programme* at local level…
>
> …I would take the responsibility of working on this with the school staff and ensuring the proposed work takes place. As the 'pilot' scheme ends, I feel confident about my greater understanding of the work I'm about. I am now confident to take the initiative in the schools and work on projects with parental involvement…I am looking forward positively.

7.8 CONCLUSION

The results of the 2000/2001 questionnaire revealed a high turnover among co-ordinators, as only 38.9% of those who had commenced work in January 1997 remained in the post in May 2001. This finding, combined with the fact that six of the 25 posts were vacant in May 2001, points to the presence of factors which make the co-ordinators' post unattractive.

In 1997/98, co-ordinators reported that school staff had received insufficient information about the scheme, leading to difficulties between themselves and staff members. It appears that these initial sources of contention were for the most part resolved, as the majority of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 said that principals' and teachers' perceptions of their role were not very, or not at all, different from their own.

The reasons for the discrepancies in role perception cited in 2000/2001 mirrored those given by co-ordinators in 1997/98. For example, where discrepancies existed, they generally resulted from the staff member's tendency to dismiss the importance of co-ordinator's work with parents. Discrepancies also arose where principals and teachers expected the co-ordinator to spend most of their time in the classroom, suggesting that in some cases, the co-ordinator's role with regard to classroom teaching needs to be clarified. Overall, the fact that the vast majority of co-ordinators in 2000/2001 reported few discrepancies between their own perception of their role and that of principals and teachers may be taken as evidence that the scheme has evolved to the stage where there is a mutual understanding among staff.

There was little change between 1997/98 and 2000/2001 in co-ordinators' perceptions of the main purpose of their role, as the majority still felt that facilitating parental involvement was integral to their work. Providing support to teachers was also seen to be a key activity among a large number of co-ordinators. In addition to working with parents and teachers, the co-ordinators' role involved liaising with outside agencies and organisations. The type of agencies that co-ordinators were in contact with varied considerably, suggesting that many co-ordinators had succeeded in establishing useful partnerships in the community.

To examine how they allocated their time, co-ordinators were asked to indicate the approximate percentage of *actual* time they spent on various tasks during a typical work week, as well as the *ideal* amount of time they would have liked to have devoted to each activity. The pattern of results for this item in 2000/2001 closely resembles those found in 1997/98. For example, in both 1997/98 and 2000/2001, remedial work occupied the highest proportion of co-ordinators' time (30.2% and 25.5%, respectively), although the collectively suggested ideal for this activity was approximately 13% in both years. In contrast, home visits occupied a smaller percentage of their time (14.2% in 1997/98, 18.9% in 2000/2001), although co-ordinators felt that, ideally, approximately 24% of time should be devoted to this activity.

Thus, the results indicate that, despite the findings of the 1997/98 questionnaire, co-ordinators in 2000/2001 were still making compromises between the time spent on what they considered to be the key activities associated with their role and the time spent on activities that are prioritised by school staff.

In a related item, co-ordinators were asked to give reasons for disparities (where they existed) between their actual and ideal working weeks. In 1997/98, the top three reasons cited for the disparity related to practical factors. A similar picture emerged in 2000/2001, with co-ordinators commenting that a lack of flexibility in working hours, time restrictions, and lack of space contributed to the disparity. These results, combined with co-ordinators' reports that inflexibility of working hours and workload hindered the scheme, clearly indicate that some of the practical concerns raised by co-ordinators earlier in the scheme have yet to be resolved.

There was unanimous agreement among co-ordinators that pupils' responses contributed to the success of the scheme. The majority also gave credit to the support received from parents, teachers, and principals. In addition, a large majority of respondents felt that the availability of funding contributed to the scheme's success.

Respondents reported that, for the most part, there was collaboration between co-ordinators and school staff in deciding how the Special Projects Grant was spent. And although co-ordinators were less informed about how the extra capitation grant was spent, most co-ordinators reported that both the Special Projects Grant and the extra capitation grant were well spent.

When invited to comment on other administrative aspects of the scheme, one-third of co-ordinators stated that more support from the Department of Education and Science was required, and a quarter felt that they were not adequately informed about the progress and future of the scheme. However, despite co-ordinators' negative comments on the scheme, there was an increase in 2000/2001 in the percentage who felt that the overall administration of the scheme contributed to its success.

As was the case in 1997/98, co-ordinators, in the main, were positive about inservice courses provided for them. Not only did the majority say that they learned a great deal, there also appeared to

be greater recognition among school staff that co-ordinators' attendance at training benefited the school.

Co-ordinators were asked what percentage of homes of pupils' in their cluster had they visited since the beginning of the current school year, and were asked to estimate what percentage of *marginalised* pupils' homes they had visited. Changes to the wording of the questionnaire item made it difficult to directly compare the percentages for 1997/98 and 2000/2001. However, the results indicate that, as in 1997/98, co-ordinators in 2000/2001 had targeted the families of marginalised pupils, which is consistent with the scheme's objectives. There was a good deal of variation between responses, with four co-ordinators visiting 100% of the homes, and one visiting only 11%. Overall, the results suggest that a significant number of marginalised pupils' homes did *not* receive visits from co-ordinators, a finding that is consistent with co-ordinators' reports that they do not spend as much time on home visits as they would like.

There was unanimous agreement among co-ordinators that visiting pupils' homes was a useful experience, and all respondents agreed that parents appreciated their visit. When asked what factors influenced their decisions to visit pupils' homes, all co-ordinators said that establishing a relationship with parents was extremely important, and the vast majority believed that parents had become more involved in their children's education as a result of the scheme. Furthermore, it appears that working with parents had a positive impact on co-ordinators' attitudes, as the number of co-ordinators who believed that the attitudes of parents who are uninterested in their children could change increased in 2000/2001. This finding is somewhat contrary to co-ordinators' responses to a related item, in which they estimated that, on average, 32.6% of parents had low educational expectations of their children. The fact that the scheme had apparently failed to change the attitudes of one-third of the parents is not surprising, however, considering co-ordinators' reports that they devote more time to work in the classroom than to work with parents. Perhaps more should be done to allow co-ordinators to spend time on what they consider to be the key activities associated with their role, namely home visits, and working with parents to enable them to support their children's educational needs.

Co-ordinators' estimates that 34% of pupils in their cluster had home backgrounds that seriously interfered with their ability to learn effectively mirrored estimates given by co-ordinators in 1997/98. Neither was there much change in the percentage of parents perceived by co-ordinators to actively encourage their children in their schoolwork, with most co-ordinators putting the figure at 55%. However estimates varied considerably.

When asked to describe their most positive experience as a *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator, the majority of co-ordinators commented on pupils' progress and the positive changes in parents' attitudes. Negativity towards co-ordinators from teachers and principals was the most common adverse experience cited by co-ordinators. When invited to make any additional comments about the scheme, the majority of co-ordinators recorded a positive comment of some kind. Half were very positive about the scheme in general, stating, for example, that it had benefited educationally

disadvantaged children in rural areas. One-third also commented on their work as a co-ordinator, noting, for example, that they had learned a great deal from it.

Agreement among co-ordinators was unanimous that their work gave them a sense of accomplishment, and all but one agreed that they enjoyed their work. Furthermore, the majority of co-ordinators felt that their work with teachers, pupils and parents was worthwhile. These findings are consistent with co-ordinators' ratings of morale levels, as three-quarters rated their individual level of morale as high, though surprising in light of the fact that the vast majority of co-ordinators indicated that their job was very, or somewhat, stressful. That co-ordinators find their work stressful may explain the high co-ordinator turnover. While the questionnaire did not provide an opportunity for co-ordinators to elaborate on the sources of stress, an examination of the common themes in their responses suggests that practical constraints, such as lack of space, as well as disparities between the ideal and actual amount of time spent on key activities, may be contributing factors.

In the final section of the questionnaire, co-ordinators were invited to comment on the introduction of the *New Programme* to tackle disadvantage at primary level. Comments tended to be negative. Of the eleven co-ordinators who indicated that their cluster composition had been altered as a result of the *New Programme,* four said that they had not been consulted about the changes. Furthermore, over a quarter said that their experiences and expertise had not been sought when the programme was being devised. One co-ordinator estimated that her workload would be increased by 70% as a result of the programme. In the face of existing concerns about workload and time constraints, the co-ordinators' negative response to the *New Programme* is not surprising.

Overall, while the small number of respondents places some limits on the conclusions that can be drawn, the results do seem to suggest that the scheme has been effective thus far. Indeed, over half of co-ordinators felt that teachers' attitudes towards marginalised pupils had changed, and there was unanimous agreement that the scheme was of benefit to marginalised pupils. These findings are consistent with the scheme's objective to enhance staff's understanding of disadvantage, and ultimately to positively impact on pupils. That the vast majority of co-ordinators stated that they enjoyed their work as a *Breaking the Cycle* co-ordinator and felt that their work was worthwhile, seems to serve as further evidence of the scheme's success.

At the same time, in fact, that six co-ordinator posts were vacant at one time suggests that there are factors which render the post unattractive. For example, it is clear that practical constraints such as lack of space, workload, and time constraints adversely affect co-ordinators' work. Co-ordinators are also forced to compromise on the time spent on what they consider to be the key activities associated with their role.

8. CONCLUSION

This chapter focuses on major findings described in previous chapters regarding the scheme's impact on schools, staff and pupils. Where appropriate, material reported in earlier evaluation reports is cited (Eivers & Weir, 1998; Weir & Ryan, 2000). The first section describes some of the evaluation's limitations, as well as factors which were unrelated to the scheme but were likely to have had a significant impact on schools during the pilot phase of the project. In reviewing the findings, an attempt is made to identify strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the scheme. In particular, where aims of the scheme have been found difficult to meet, suggestions for improved strategies are made. Positive outcomes of the scheme are highlighted.

8.1. FACTORS AFFECTING THE EVALUATION

8.1.1. Methodological considerations.

The evaluation was subject to several limitations. First, data collection did not begin until early in the first year of the scheme, and so the scheme was already in operation when baseline data were gathered. While this was unfortunate, it was unavoidable, as the request to evaluate the scheme was not made until after the scheme had started.

Throughout this report, we have attempted to assess the extent to which the scheme had an impact on various areas of school life, but it would be naïve to think that all observed changes were entirely attributable to participation in the scheme. Many other developments occurred during the first five years of the scheme, including the introduction of the new (more child-centred) curriculum, the establishment of the Education Welfare Boards and the National Educational Psychological Service, and schools' participation in the IT 2000 project. Schools may also have been involved in other initiatives, information on which was sought in 1999 and was presented in an earlier report (Weir & Ryan, 2000). In total, 13 schools in that year indicated that they were involved in other local or national schemes, initiatives, or pilot projects aimed at pupils in disadvantaged areas[1]. It might be expected that participation in other schemes would have had a variety of effects on schools, which it is clearly impossible to isolate from those of *Breaking the Cycle.* The evaluation was also somewhat constrained by the lack of a control group (i.e., a sample of schools with similar characteristics to those participating in *Breaking the Cycle*, but which were not participating in the scheme). The availability of such a group would have permitted the effects of the scheme on achievement to be assessed more precisely.

The data collected for the evaluation, while extremely broad in scope, were not completely comprehensive. In particular, it would have been useful to have sought the input of parents of pupils

in participating schools, given their key role as the primary educators of their children. Also, due in part to the large number of participating schools, data collected tended to be very quantitative in nature. However, some important variables, such as school climate and atmosphere, are very difficult to quantify. An attempt was made to measure the impact of the scheme on school atmosphere in 1999, when teachers were asked to rate their schools prior to and following the introduction of the scheme on a variety of variables (see Weir & Ryan, 2000). The data indicated that teachers perceived the atmosphere in their schools to be more welcoming, friendly, pleasant and warm, as well as more colourful, comfortable, clean, ordered and disciplined than was the case prior to the introduction of the scheme.

It is acknowledged that the evaluation failed to take into account the breadth of achievements among pupils in participating schools. Achievements were measured in only two curriculum areas, reading and Mathematics, albeit areas that are clearly of great significance for pupils' future educational development and beyond. Various studies confirm that literacy and numeracy levels significantly affect an individual's employment prospects (e.g., Morgan, Hickey & Kellaghan, 1997).

Schools' participation in the scheme was contingent upon their agreement to the administration of tests to pupils at regular intervals. However, this was the only aspect of the evaluation for which the prior co-operation of staff was sought. Despite this, the evaluators were struck by the high response rates among principals and teachers to questionnaires, particularly given their often quite lengthy nature. In 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000, response rates for questionnaires administered to teachers were 96.2%, 91.9%, 88.5% and 90.6%, respectively. Response rates among principals were even higher. In 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2001, rates for principals' questionnaires were 99.2%, 97.6%, 95.1%, 94.3%, and 98.3%, respectively. A questionnaire was distributed to co-ordinators in 1998 and in 2001. The response rate in 1997/98 was 100%. Only one co-ordinator did not return a questionnaire in 2001. A once-off questionnaire on school planning administered in the last year of the scheme, which was designed to be completed by principals in consultation with class teachers, was returned by 95.1% of schools.

All schools were extremely co-operative in relation to the administration of achievement tests to pupils in 1997 and 2000, and teachers of 3rd and 6th class pupils made every effort to facilitate the scheduling of testing sessions. While the vast majority of teachers were happy to have cluster co-ordinators administer the tests, a small number felt that the tests should have been administered by the pupils' class teachers. There are arguments for and against both approaches. It is possible that pupils would have been more at ease with their class teachers than with co-ordinators, but it was felt that standardised procedures would be easier to implement if co-ordinators were engaged to do the testing.

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[1]Not including the Scheme of Assistance for Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage, in which six schools were also participating.

8.1.2. Demographic changes.

From the time the scheme began in 1996/97 until the end of its pilot phase in 2001, Ireland experienced unprecedented economic growth. Among other things, this growth was associated with falling unemployment levels. Long-term unemployment (which was one of the variables used in the selection of schools for the scheme) fell nationally from 7% in April 1996 to 1.6% in the Spring of 2000 (Central Statistics Office, 2000). These changes in the broader economy might also have been expected to impact on families served by participating schools. A comparison of data from schools' applications to join *Breaking the Cycle* in 1996 with data collected in 2000 as part of a national survey of disadvantage in primary schools (Department of Education and Science, 2001) indicates that the economic circumstances of families served improved somewhat over this period. When schools were selected for participation in the scheme, larger percentages of the families they served were characterised by long-term unemployment, held medical cards, and were in receipt of financial assistance due to low farm incomes than was the case in the 2000 survey (see Table 3.37). Although the decrease in the percentage of families satisfying one of the criteria is reasonably large (i.e., there were 8.4% fewer families receiving financial assistance due to low income from farming in 2000 than had been the case in 1996), families served by the schools were still faring much more poorly relative to the national population in 2000. In fact, by 2000, reported rates of long-term unemployment among families in the selected schools were more than 30 times those of the national population, whereas in 1996 they were only eight times those of the national population. The fact that long-term unemployment decreased by only 3.9% between 1996 and 2000 among families in participating schools suggests that the upturn in the economy did not have much impact on the rural areas in which *Breaking the Cycle* schools are located.

8.2. SCHOOL RESOURCES AND ORGANISATION

8.2.1. Personnel and physical resources.

Despite declining enrolments, the number of class teachers in *Breaking the Cycle* schools remained the same between 1995/96 (the year before the start of the scheme) and 2000. However, there is evidence that schools' access to non-class teachers (such as remedial teachers and Arts & Crafts instructors) increased during this period. In some cases, schools used a proportion of the additional funding allocated for "special projects" to employ sessional teachers in various areas. As one teacher pointed out, the presence of a variety of extra teachers has served to open up the school environment in some of the more isolated rural schools.

The majority of principals reported some difficulties in recruiting staff. A survey undertaken by the Joint Committee on Education and Science (Ireland, 2000) suggested that *Breaking the Cycle* principals were not alone in their struggle to fill teaching posts, however, as the vast majority of schools that replied to the Committee's survey said that they were having more difficulty recruiting

qualified teachers than three years previously. That most common barrier in the recruitment of staff, according to *Breaking the Cycle* principals, was the location of schools, followed by a shortage of qualified teaching staff. While the Department of Education and Science has sought to address the problem of teacher shortages in primary schools, it is likely that offering incentives, financial or otherwise, to attract teachers to posts in isolated rural schools would also help to ease principals' difficulties. However, it is noteworthy that most principals had no difficulty in retaining teachers. The fact that most teachers felt involved in the decision-making process, and reported that there was a strong sense of community in the school might explain, in part, why principals were having few difficulties with staff retention, as such factors contribute to improved morale and good working conditions.

Although schools' outdoor facilities remained unchanged since the outset of the scheme, there were some improvements to indoor facilities. For example, schools were significantly more likely in the last year of the scheme to report having a remedial teacher's room, a principal's office, and an administrative office than was the case at the outset. However, this may not mean that schools had additional internal accommodation, but that they were using space flexibly and making the most productive use of the space available to them.

Schools were also much better resourced in terms of teaching equipment and materials in 2000 than had been the case in the year immediately preceding the scheme. Items such as overhead projectors, cameras, televisions and photocopiers were found in much greater numbers than was the case prior to the scheme. One area in which very substantial improvements were noted was in the availability of computer hardware and software, but this undoubtedly is due to schools' participation in the Schools IT2000 initiative rather than a result of *Breaking the Cycle*. In the case of both equipment and books, there was a large decrease between 1995/96 and 2000/2001 in the percentage of principals who indicated that their schools were adversely affected by equipment and book shortages in the areas of English and Mathematics. However, areas such as Irish, Music, and P.E., were still perceived to be inadequately served by equipment and books in 2000/2001. This may, however, reflect a dearth of commercially available materials in some curriculum areas (e.g., in Irish) rather than a lack of funds to invest in such materials.

Overall, it seems that the additional funding provided under the scheme enabled participating schools to purchase a wide range of necessary items. Principals and teachers cited the extra funding for materials and equipment as one of the most important benefits of the scheme. This was deemed to be particularly important because of the difficulties of fundraising in a community with a small number of families.

8.2.2. School planning for *Breaking the Cycle.*

At the time of applying to participate in *Breaking the Cycle*, schools undertook to develop a five-year plan designed to respond to the needs of pupils in their schools. Data on the planning process in the areas of curriculum, school organisation, and home-school liaison were gathered on two occasions, once in 1998, and again in 2001 at the end of the pilot phase of the scheme. Due to the volume of potential data on school planning, during the last year of the pilot phase schools were asked to provide details of one curriculum, one home-school, and one organisational priority for the purpose of the evaluation. Therefore, the evaluation data on school planning are far from comprehensive, but they do provide a flavour of the kinds of issues schools judged to be important, and give some insight into the strategies employed to achieve specified objectives in various areas.

The majority of schools (over 90%) in 2001 selected English as their curriculum priority, and nine out of ten of these indicated that a major focus was on the improvement of pupils' English reading/ writing skills and/or the development of the school's library facilities. Of the remaining schools that specified English as a priority area, the majority aimed to improve pupils' oral language skills. The two most commonly cited home-school priorities were the organisation of educational or extra-curricular courses for parents, followed by increasing parental involvement in school activities generally. Other priorities in this area included providing opportunities for parents to meet each other socially, and organising pre-school courses for parents and children. By far the most frequently cited organisational priority (cited by 42 schools) related to the organisation of sports events, such as jointly organising sports days with other schools in the cluster. Less common priorities included those in the area of the arts, and included, for example, trips to concerts and dramatic productions, or engaging an artist in residence. Increasing co-operation between schools in the cluster was a priority for about one school in ten.

The strategies adopted by schools varied depending on the prioritised area. In addressing curriculum priorities, schools commonly used the strategy of purchasing new teaching equipment. Running courses for parents was a frequently cited home-school strategy, while organising sporting events featured widely as an organisational strategy. The methods used by schools to assess the impact of their efforts in specific areas were diverse. For example, in evaluating their attempts to improve pupils' English reading/writing, schools most often relied on the results of formal or informal tests. In contrast, parent opinion was most commonly used to assess the impact of home-school strategies, although 16 schools indicated that evaluation involved recording the numbers of parents attending and completing courses. The opinions of the children themselves represented the main source of feedback in the organisational area (mainly in relation to sports and arts events organised for them). It is interesting to note that so many schools consulted the pupils themselves about the activities, and suggests that pupils were seen as active participants in the school community, rather than as passive recipients of decisions made on their behalf by teachers and parents.

The planning process was not without its problems. For example, practical factors such as lack of funding and time constraints were sometimes perceived to limit the effectiveness of schools' efforts. Overambitious targets were set by some schools, and some of the initiatives were considered to be disruptive of normal school life. A common observation in relation to curriculum priorities was that weaker children, or those with special needs, did not benefit much from the initiatives. In the main, however, the available data indicate that the planning process had a range of beneficial effects on schools. Apart from the fact that the majority of schools noted improvements in prioritised areas, other positive outcomes were noted. For example, the planning process forced schools to focus on weak areas and to consider how they might be tackled. Schools were also required to identify challenges, to set targets, and to decide on methods of evaluating the success of the strategies employed. The data indicate that the plans themselves were the subject of ongoing focus and were subject to revision where necessary. This suggests that the planning process operated as a learning experience for schools. For example, an examination of the methods of evaluating the success or otherwise of planning strategies revealed that, towards the end of the scheme, evaluation methods were becoming much more objective. Finally, the development of a plan was described by some as having led to a greater sense of community among school staff, parents, pupils, and co-ordinators, as well as, in some cases, between schools in the cluster.

8.2.3. Home-school links.

The particular importance, when working with disadvantaged communities, of fostering links between the home and the school is widely acknowledged. Indeed, promoting the active involvement of parents in school life was considered a central component of the rural dimension of *Breaking the Cycle* from the outset, and one of the key elements of the cluster co-ordinator's role was the fostering of home-school links. The scheme's effects, therefore, on the nature and extent of links between schools and parents, are of central importance in evaluating the effectiveness of the scheme.

Data collected from principals over the first four years of the scheme indicate that parents were involved in a wide range of school-related activities, from participating in educational courses to assisting in the running of events such as concerts and sports days, and volunteering to help with school libraries. In the first year, only about one school in ten provided educational courses for parents to enable them to assist their children with schoolwork. However, by 1999/2000, virtually all schools offered such courses. The nature of the courses changed somewhat over the four-year period, with a decrease towards the end of the pilot phase in the number of schools that offered programmes in Mathematics and Irish. This coincided with an increase in the percentage of schools that offered pre-entry and paired reading programmes and courses in computers, the latter being consistent with schools' efforts to improve pupils' computer literacy and I.T. skills. The shift in emphasis over the years suggests that schools were responding to the needs of both parents and pupils when considering the provision of courses. There was also a substantial increase in the number of schools offering

'extra-curricular' courses for parents between the first and fourth years of the scheme. Less than 10% did so in 1996/97, but by 1999/2000, more than two-thirds of schools organised such courses for parents. While parenting courses were popular in each year, the emphasis of some of the courses appears to have changed over the life of the scheme. In year two, schools tended to offer courses on health information, while the following year, the major focus was on home management. This shift is not surprising as schools serve a limited pool of parents, and one would expect schools to avoid repeating topics which had been offered in previous years.

One interesting finding is that, over the course of the scheme, the percentage of parents who visited the school on their own initiative (for reasons other than to deliver or collect their children) increased significantly. This may indicate that the school was perceived by parents to be a more welcoming, or at least a less threatening, place. Equally, it might reflect the work of co-ordinators in breaking down perceived barriers between parents and schools. Between the year preceding the scheme and 2000/20001, there was also a significant increase in the percentage of *teachers* who visited homes.

Overall, the data suggest that the range of contacts that parents had with schools increased over the five years of the pilot scheme. There was no change, however, in principals' estimates of the percentage of parents that had low educational expectations of their children, or in their estimates of the percentage of parents that lacked an interest in the educational progress of their children.

8.3. THE IMPACT OF THE SCHEME ON STAFF

8.3.1. Principals' views of the scheme.

The vast majority of principals agreed that *Breaking the Cycle* had had a positive overall effect on their schools. Towards the end of the pilot phase of the scheme, principals were significantly more likely than at the outset to indicate that the scheme had a very positive impact on the school, on teaching practices, and on staff morale. Furthermore, almost all principals thought that marginalised pupils had benefited from participation in the scheme. Most felt that pupils' academic achievement had improved somewhat, assessed both by formal and informal tests and informally by teachers. Over 90% of principals perceived an increase in pupils' self-esteem, and the majority noted a positive effect on pupils' standard of social interaction.

One of the major provisions of the scheme was the additional funding provided to schools for special projects and out-of-school activities. The most popular activities included theatre/cinema trips, sporting events, Art, and music lessons. These were followed by historical and cultural outings and literary activities. A minority of schools organised nature outings, attended festivals, and used the funding to pay for computer courses and dance lessons. In the last year of the pilot phase of the scheme, when principals were asked to indicate the amount of class time (in hours) in a typical week that Junior, Middle, and Senior pupils engaged in out-of-school activities and special projects, they

indicated that, on average, pupils spent approximately 1 to 1.5 hours per week on such activities. The time spent increased with grade level, with Junior pupils spending the least time, and Senior pupils the most time. There is no doubt that out-of-school activities and special projects were perceived by principals to have had a very positive impact on pupils, and that the dedicated funding under the scheme provided pupils with opportunities that they would have otherwise been denied. Over one-quarter of principals also commented that pupils benefited from the extra funding for resources, equipment and materials. Furthermore, principals noted that teachers were more aware of the needs of marginalised children, and that parents' attitudes towards their children's education had improved.

Although principals' comments about the scheme were, in the main, positive, several used the opportunity to voice concerns. First, the fact that 10% of principals asked for clarification in relation to the future of the scheme points to a need for improved communication and consultation with the Department of Education and Science. Furthermore, just over 10% felt that the administration of the scheme was time-consuming. Given that almost all principals had full-time teaching responsibilities, additional administrative support to help them cope with the increased workload might be beneficial. Finally, one in six principals reported problems relating to the co-ordinator post, for example noting that the role was too varied, or that co-ordinators' workload was excessive. On the other hand, almost a quarter of principals commented that the co-ordinator was an asset to the school and that their work was beneficial to teachers, pupils, and parents.

8.3.2. Co-ordinators' views of the scheme

There was unanimous agreement among co-ordinators that the scheme had had a positive impact on marginalised pupils. As was the case with teachers, most co-ordinators felt that pupils benefited from exposure to a variety of activities which were available as a result of the scheme. Co-ordinators also perceived pupils as having benefited from increased parental involvement. The majority agreed, or strongly agreed, that parents in their cluster had become more involved in their children's education, and over three-quarters reported that the scheme had changed teachers' attitudes towards marginalised pupils. These findings suggest that the scheme was effective in its objective of enhancing staff's understanding of disadvantage, promoting parental involvement in their children's education, and ultimately positively impacting on pupils.

For the most part, co-ordinators' perceptions of their own work were also positive. Almost all agreed that their work was worthwhile and gave them a sense of accomplishment, and all but one reported that they enjoyed their work. Furthermore, over three-quarters rated their current level of morale as high. In light of these findings, it is noteworthy that only 38.9% of co-ordinators who commenced work at the outset of the scheme were still in their posts in 2001. The extremely high turnover rate, combined with the fact that six of the 25 posts were vacant in May 2001, suggests the presence of factors which render the co-ordinator post unattractive.

In both 1997 and 2001, most co-ordinators viewed working with parents and fostering home-school links as integral to their work. Supporting teachers was also seen by many co-ordinators to be an important element of their role. In 2001, the majority of co-ordinators considered principals' and teachers' perceptions of their role to be not very, or not at all, different from their own. The finding that co-ordinators were less likely in 2001 than in 1997 to report incongruities between their own perceptions and those of teachers and principals suggests that the co-operation and consultation between co-ordinators and school staff improved as the scheme evolved.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a need for further communication and planning where co-ordinators' daily activities are concerned, as co-ordinators in 2001 were still making compromises between the time spent on what they considered to be the key activities associated with their role, and the time spent on activities prioritised by the school staff. For example, co-ordinators spent significantly more than the ideal suggested time on remedial work, while the time they devoted to activities such home visits and working with parents was significantly lower than the collectively suggested ideal. Almost half of co-ordinators said that the time spent dealing with the concerns of school staff contributed to the disparity between their ideal and actual working week, suggesting a need for further inservice for teachers and principals. Further specification of the co-ordinators' role by the Department of Education and Science, in collaboration with co-ordinators and school staff, might help to resolve some of the issues regarding co-ordinators' work.

It appears that practical constraints also hindered the work of co-ordinators, as they consistently raised concerns about time restrictions, limited flexibility of working hours, and lack of space. Not only did these factors probably contribute to co-ordinators' stress, it seems that they also affected other school staff, as concerns about co-ordinators' position and workload were reflected in the comments of several teachers and principals in their questionnaire responses.

In home visits, it appears that co-ordinators were targeting the families of marginalised pupils, which is consistent with the scheme's objectives. Nevertheless, the data also suggest that a large number of marginalised pupils' homes did not receive visits from co-ordinators. Thus, strategies to enable co-ordinators to spend time on what they consider to be the key activities associated with their role, namely home visits and facilitating parental involvement in school, should be considered. This might entail lessening their teaching workload. Alternatively, decreasing the number of schools in the cluster may help to make co-ordinators' workload more manageable (co-ordinators suggested that 2-3 schools per cluster would be more suitable). Furthermore, co-ordinators noted that many parents work and are, therefore, unavailable for home visits and courses during the day. Thus, strategies to increase the flexibility of co-ordinators working hours, for example, by offering time in lieu where co-ordinators visit homes and organise courses in the evening, should be considered. Finally, although schools were attempting to maximise the physical space available to them, it appears that more needs to be done to accommodate co-ordinators. A base office, complete with access to necessary equipment, including a desk, filing cabinet, phone, fax and computer, should be made available.

Overall, addressing co-ordinators' practical concerns should help to decrease their stress and increase their job satisfaction, and might enhance the effectiveness of the scheme by enabling them to devote more time to activities which they deem important.

Despite the practical constraints which plagued co-ordinators, the majority felt that the response from pupils, and the support received from parents, teachers, and principals contributed to the success of the scheme. Almost all co-ordinators also felt that the availability of funding contributed to the scheme's success, and there was little dispute regarding the deployment of the extra funding under the scheme.

In contrast, co-ordinators were less positive about the assistance they received from the Department of Education and Science, as almost one-quarter felt that the level of support from the Department hindered the success of the scheme. Furthermore, when commenting on the administration of the scheme, over one-third suggested the need for more collaboration with the Department and Inspectorate. Furthermore, one-quarter of co-ordinators felt they were not adequately informed about the progress and future of the scheme. Finally, co-ordinators' comments about the *New Programme* tended to be negative and further reflected a lack of communication from the Department. All of these findings point to a need for additional support and direction from the Department of Education and Science.

It appears that the inservice courses organised for co-ordinators were beneficial, as most co-ordinators reported that school staff recognised their value, and the majority felt that they had learned a great deal. However, over three-quarters recommended that stress management and personal development courses be offered, which is not surprising in light of the fact that the majority rated their work as somewhat or very stressful. Although some co-ordinators indicated that inservice courses enabled them to meet other co-ordinators, it was suggested that they would benefit from meeting locally at least once a month, and for all 25 to meet at least once a term. Such meetings, by giving co-ordinators a chance to collaborate and share their experiences, might help to prevent them from becoming disillusioned, and would complement the support received from school staff and the Department of Education and Science.

8.3.3. Teachers' views of the scheme and educational expectations for pupils.

Teachers' perceptions of the scheme were, in the main, positive. In 1999/2000, the vast majority indicated that their ability to understand the nature of educational disadvantage had improved, and that their opinions, attitudes, and teaching practices had changed. Most teachers felt that the scheme was of benefit to marginalised pupils, a view that became more prevalent towards the end of the scheme. Both the dedicated funding for teaching materials and equipment, and the grant-aid for special projects and out-of-school activities were seen as particularly beneficial to pupils. Teachers also perceived the scheme to have had a positive impact on the school atmosphere generally, and on morale in particular.

Their responses also indicated that they had a part in the decision-making process in the school, and that their school had a strong sense of community.

Towards the end of the scheme, it appears that teachers became more sure of their own ability to influence pupils' performance. In the last two years of the scheme, a decreasing percentage attributed their pupils' performance to factors beyond their control rather than to their own teaching ability and efforts. This is to be welcomed, as it was hoped that teachers in participating schools would increasingly accept responsibility for their pupils' success and failure, given that this has been identified as a feature of effective teaching (Kellaghan, 1994). On the other hand, similar percentages of teachers in 1999/2000 and in 1996/97 agreed that all pupils could achieve a basic level of literacy if taught properly, and similar percentages estimated that over 60% of their pupils came from home backgrounds which seriously impeded their ability to learn. Furthermore, there was no increase in the proportion – only about one-third on each occasion – who estimated that 80% or more of their pupils would continue in school following the Junior Certificate. These estimates may be contrasted with those of pupils themselves, among whom 92.6% indicated that they would complete the Leaving Certificate or go on to third level. It was hoped that participation in the scheme would have had a positive impact on teachers' expectations of their pupils, since the assumptions teachers make about pupils' potential may have significant effects on how well and how much pupils learn.

The failure to find more of a shift in teachers' perceptions may relate to the lack of inservice towards the end of the pilot phase of the scheme. (This was due to the requirement on teachers to attend six days of inservice on the new curriculum in both 1999/2000 and 20000/2001). The fact that teachers' expectations for their pupils were low in some areas suggests that further consideration should be given to strategies to sensitize teachers to possible biases in their evaluations of pupils. Providing teachers with general opportunities to meet, and encouraging interaction among them, should be beneficial. Given that the provision of incareer development programmes for staff was one of the key elements of the scheme, strategies should be adopted to prevent the curtailment of such programmes from recurring in the future.

8.3.4. Teachers' instructional practices

In 1999/2000, 98% of teachers who returned a teacher questionnaire indicated that they taught more than one grade level. The average number of pupils taught by teachers in that year was just below 20, which represents a decrease of three pupils since the year prior to the introduction of the scheme. Despite the relatively small pupil numbers, teachers were quick to point out the challenges posed by the multi-grade classroom[2], and indeed, many suggested that reduced pupil-teacher ratios (as they operate at Junior level in the urban equivalent of the scheme) were desirable to maximise the

[2] It should be noted that, despite the additional demands posed by multi-grade classrooms, pupils' achievements were comparable with those of pupils nationally.

educational opportunities provided by *Breaking the Cycle*. Data reported in this section (e.g., on teachers' grouping practices) should be interpreted in light of the fact that the majority of pupils were taught in multi-grade classes.

Teachers reported spending the most class time per week on English, followed by Mathematics and Irish. In each of these areas, instruction mainly took the form of whole-class teaching, followed by small-group instruction, and individual instruction. Approximately one-quarter of class time was spent on small-group instruction in English and Mathematics, while such an approach characterised less than one-fifth of instruction time in Irish. A whole-class approach was more commonly used to teach Irish than English or Mathematics, and teachers reported doing very little individual work with children in Irish, although a significant decrease in the time spent in whole-class teaching in Irish was noted between 1996/97 and 1999/2000.

Almost all teachers sometimes, or always, outlined the aim of a lesson prior to instruction and asked pupils questions at the end of the lesson to find out what they had learned. Furthermore, an increasing number of teachers in 1999/2000 always ascertained pupils' level of knowledge at the beginning of a lesson and varied their teaching style for different pupils. The majority asked parents to help with, monitor, and sign their children's homework. These findings reflect an effort to engage in purposeful teaching, build on pupils' existing knowledge, monitor and evaluate pupils' performance, and promote parents' involvement in their children's learning. Although teachers, for the most part, reported adopting a range of instructional strategies which are generally associated with 'effective teaching', some areas of teachers' work may require further attention.

Over the course of the first four years, there was a *decrease* in the mean number of hours per week that teachers spent on Mathematics, and an increase in the proportion of time allocated to Social and Environmental Studies. Given that the amount of time spent on task has been shown to be positively correlated with pupils' achievement, this trend might help explain why pupils' literacy achievements exceeded slightly their numeracy achievements in 2000. However, it should be acknowledged that the time teachers spent on both Mathematics and English was considerably higher than the minimum recommended in the revised Primary School Curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999).

One of the major provisions of the scheme was a dedicated grant for out-of-school activities and special projects, the aim of which was to broaden children's educational experiences. Teachers' responses indicated that in the 1999/2000 school year, they spent an average of one and a half hours class time prior to, and following, the selected activities on related issues. It seems that teachers attempted to maximise the educational opportunities provided by the activities, as more than half indicated that they used poetry, essays and other written work as a way of incorporating the chosen activity into lessons. Other, less common, approaches included initiating class discussion, and incorporating the activity into lessons through art and craft, singing, dance, and drama.

8.4. THE IMPACT OF THE SCHEME ON PUPILS

The most important aim of an initiative such as *Breaking the Cycle* is it to produce a positive impact on pupils. Hence, the scheme's effect on pupils is of critical importance in judging its effectiveness. The range of potential positive effects at pupil level is broad, and may include a reduction in absenteeism, improvements in behaviour and discipline, changes in pupils' attitudes towards school and schoolwork, and improved achievement. The evaluation attempted to assess the extent to which each of the foregoing was affected by participation in the scheme.

8.4.1. Attendance.

There are two sources of information on pupil attendance: responses to a series of items in a school questionnaire which principals completed on an annual basis and records of the attendance rates of 3rd and 6th class pupils during the reading and Mathematics achievement testing sessions in 1997 and 2000.

In an item in the annual school questionnaire, principals were asked to state the annual percentage attendance rate for their schools. This information, which is available for participating schools over an eight-year period (1992/93 to 1999/2000 inclusive), shows that there was no overall improvement in attendance rates since the introduction of the scheme in 1996/97 (see Table 5.15 in Chapter 5). However, the average attendance rate in *Breaking the Cycle* schools of about 92% compares quite favourably with the daily attendance rates of 91%, 91%, 90%, and 90% in all Dublin city schools for the years 1996/1997 through 1999/2000 (School Attendance Committee, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000).

A reliance on annual percentage attendance rates as indicators of attendance may mask the fact that problems are particularly significant for some families. For this reason, it is worth examining the attendance of pupils who could be considered very poor attenders. Between the first year of the scheme (1996/97) and 1999/2000, there was a significant decrease in the number of chronic low attenders (i.e., pupils who did not transfer to another school or were not ill, but who attended for 10 days or fewer in the first quarter of the school year). However, it should be noted that the numbers of pupils with such poor attendance records was very small, and averaged only 0.29 pupils per school in 1999/2000 for the final three-quarters of each school year.

Absenteeism on the days of achievement testing was low at both class levels in 1997 and 2000. Attendance rates at 6th class level were comparable with those at 3rd, and rates in 2000 were comparable with those in 1997. It is unfortunate that attendance data were not available for each pupil, since such data would have permitted an examination of the relationship between achievement and attendance at the individual pupil level. However, other research has generally demonstrated an association between poor attendance and low achievement. For example, in the 1999 phase of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS R), higher Mathematics scores at eighth

grade were found to be associated with higher attendance levels (Mullis et al., 2001). Similarly, the Scottish Council for Research in Education examined the links between pupils' attendance and their achievements in the final two years of secondary school and found that as absenteeism increased, students' level of examination grades decreased (Malcolm et al., 1996). The relatively good attendance levels among pupils in the selected schools may help to explain the fact that their achievements are comparable with those of pupils nationally.

8.4.2. Discipline.

One potential effect of a scheme such as *Breaking the Cycle* is a reduction in the incidence of discipline problems in schools. The data show that there was very little change in discipline levels between the year immediately preceding the scheme (1995/96) and 1999/2000 (i.e., there were no significant increases among Junior, Middle, and Senior classes in the incidence of most types of misbehaviour). An exception, however, was late arrival at school, which was more of a problem among Junior pupils in 1999/2000 than in the year immediately preceding the scheme. It should be noted, however , that even in 1999/2000, tardiness was a problem for only a very small percentage of pupils. In contrast, the prevalence of absenteeism among pupils in the Middle classes decreased significantly, while at Senior level, the incidence of tobacco use (which involved only three pupils in 1999/2000) also decreased significantly.

Some evidence to suggest a decline in discipline problems since the beginning of the scheme comes from data on the number of suspensions of pupils from school as a result of serious breaches of discipline. Although the number of cases was small, about half as many 3-day suspensions were applied to pupils in 1999/2000 as in 1995/96, while there were no 10-day suspensions in 1999/2000. Taken together, the findings suggest that the scheme may have had a small positive effect on discipline levels, but that discipline problems are a relative rarity in participating schools.

8.4.3. Attitudes.

Data on the attitudes to school and schoolwork, self, and home of 6th class pupils in participating schools are available for 1997 and 2000. Identical questionnaire items were administered to the 6th class cohorts on both occasions.

The positive attitude to school of pupils in both the 1997 and 2000 cohorts is striking. Pupils' liking for school was already high in 1997, and a slightly higher percentage in 2000 agreed that they liked school. The data, however, contain no evidence of a significant increase in pupils' liking for school following the introduction of the scheme. Comparative data on liking for school among a national sample are available for 5th class pupils who participated in the National Assessment of English Reading in 1998 (Cosgrove et al., 2000), in which a smaller percentage of pupils indicated that they liked school or liked school "a lot" than was the case in *Breaking the Cycle* schools. Furthermore, while there was a positive correlation between liking for school and reading achievement

among the National Assessment sample, positive correlations of a greater magnitude between liking school and both reading and Mathematics test scores were found among *Breaking the Cycle* pupils.

The vast majority of pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools in 2000 claimed that they were proud of their schoolwork and felt that they were doing well at school. However, pride in schoolwork was not associated with reading or Mathematics achievement (probably due to a lack of variance in the pride in schoolwork variable). On the other hand, pupils who agreed that they liked to be asked questions in class and who agreed that they were doing well at school achieved higher scores in both reading and Mathematics. The highest correlation in the set was that between pupils' test scores and their educational expectations (i.e., how long they expected to continue in formal education). One finding of particular interest to the evaluation is that significantly more pupils in 2000 than in 1997 indicated that they thought they would remain, and wished to, remain in education until third level. However, in 2000 there was a considerable discrepancy (18.1%) between the percentage of pupils *wanting* to go to college and *expecting* to go to college. A comparison with data from the National Assessment of English Reading in 1998 (Cosgrove et al., 2000) reveals that there was a greater discrepancy between the educational aspirations and expectations of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils than among pupils in the National Assessment.

Between 1997 and 2000 there was an increase in the percentage of pupils who thought that success at school depended on factors outside their own control. Specifically, significant increases were found in the percentages of pupils agreeing that success at school depended on being "smart" and being "lucky". There were some differences between boys and girls. Girls were more positively disposed than boys to school, with dislike for school being much more common among boys than among girls. This finding is consistent with those of other studies, such as the National Assessment of English Reading in 1998 (Cosgrove et al., 2000). Furthermore, both the educational aspirations and expectations of girls in *Breaking the Cycle* schools significantly exceeded those of boys. In their self-ratings in a range of curriculum areas, the self-evaluations of boys exceeded those of girls only in the area of Sport, while girls rated themselves significantly higher than did boys in Irish reading, Irish writing, English reading, Arts and Craft and Music. It is unclear why boys have less positive attitudes than girls to school. However, the finding is consistent with the fact that a greater percentage of boys than of girls who received their primary education in participating schools left school prior to taking the Junior Certificate Examination (see Weir & Ryan, 2000). Furthermore, principals reported that levels of psychological assessments were higher among boys than among girls, and that it was much more common for boys than for girls to be referred for assessment for poor academic performance and behavioural problems.

8.4.4. Achievement.

One of the most frequently cited and widely acknowledged correlates of disadvantage is poor scholastic performance. It follows, therefore, that a successful intervention should aim to positively

impact on pupils' achievements. The baseline achievements of 3rd and 6th class pupils in participating schools were described by Eivers & Weir (1998), while the achievements of pupils in these grade levels three years later were described in Chapter 3 of this report.

At the outset of the scheme, there were a number of expectations about its potential effects on pupil achievement. One was that participation should impact positively on pupils' achievements. Another was that the scheme, if effective, might help to reduce the achievement gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and pupils with more favourable backgrounds. The data do not lend much support to the first expectation, because there were no significant differences in either 1997 or 2000 between the achievements of pupils in our sample and those in the norm groups in reading or Mathematics. However, in reading, test scores of 3rd class pupils in the selected schools exceeded slightly those of the norm group in 1997 and 2000, while the scores of 6th class pupils were slightly lower than those of the norm group in both years. In Mathematics, the scores of 3rd and 6th class pupils in our sample in both years were exceeded slightly by those of the norm group. This would seem to indicate that pupils in *Breaking the Cycle* schools are weaker in Mathematics than in reading, and that, relative to the norm group, 3rd class pupils performed better than 6th class pupils. This latter finding is consistent with the contention that the achievement gap between pupils from unfavourable backgrounds and those with more favourable backgrounds widens as they progress through the school system. The finding that pupils were slightly stronger in reading than in Mathematics is also supported by an examination of high- and low-scorers. While the average Mathematics test score of *Breaking the Cycle* pupils is not significantly different from that of the norm group, the distribution of the scores of the two groups differs. More than twice as many *Breaking the Cycle* pupils achieved scores that are one standard deviation below the mean as achieved scores that are one standard deviation above it. Furthermore, in 1997 and 2000 at both grade levels, less than half as many pupils achieved Mathematics scores above the 90th percentile as achieved scores below the 10th percentile.

The findings in relation to achievement may be considered in the context of schools using the process of school planning to address what they considered to be their curriculum priorities over the life of the pilot scheme. More than nine out of ten principals identified the area of English as their major curriculum focus, whereas fewer than one in ten prioritised Mathematics. Teachers also spent significantly more class time on English than on Mathematics (see Chapter 6). While these factors might help to explain the fact that pupils' performance was slightly weaker in tests of numeracy than of literacy, it does prompt the question as to why – given its weakness relative to English – more schools did not prioritise Mathematics. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests that schools, when given access to learning support teachers, are more likely to deploy them in addressing pupils' literacy needs rather than their needs in Mathematics. This factor may also help to explain the slightly weaker performance of pupils in Mathematics.

While there was an expectation that participation in the scheme would impact positively on pupils' achievements, this might not have been reasonable given that the baseline achievements of

pupils in the selected schools were already comparable with those of pupils nationally. In fact, to significantly increase their achievements between 1997 and 2000, pupils in our sample would have needed to significantly outperform pupils in the norm groups. However, the fact that pupils in the selected schools performed at about the national average is not consistent with what one would expect of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. It may be the case that material deprivation does not inevitably lead to educational disadvantage in rural areas. For example, a range of family, school, and community factors may operate to counteract the effects of material poverty in rural areas. Indeed, a series of correlations performed between pupils' reading and Mathematics scores in 2000 and school-level socio-economic variables relating to the same year failed to show any significant association between achievement and levels of unemployment and medical card possession. However, it should be noted that, in addition to their rural profile, schools in the scheme were also characterised by their small size. One American review of school size and achievement claims that the relationship between achievement and socioeconomic status is substantially weaker in smaller schools than in larger schools (Howley, Strange & Bickel, 2000). Furthermore, these authors cite evidence that school performance among impoverished communities benefits from small school size, whereas in affluent communities, larger school size is associated with higher achievement.

It is also possible that disadvantaged pupils in rural areas are spread across a large number of schools rather than being concentrated in a relatively small number of schools (as tends to be the case in urban areas). If this is true, then pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds would make only a small contribution to a school's average achievement score, and that score would not be expected to differ significantly from that of the norm group. It is also possible that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in rural areas attend larger schools in small towns. To determine which is the case, a survey would need to be undertaken in which the achievements of pupils in an adequately sized sample of rural schools were assessed. This would provide an estimate of the extent to which low-achieving pupils from disadvantaged rural backgrounds are concentrated in schools, or are dispersed over a larger number of schools.

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