

OPINIONS OF THE IRISH PUBLIC ON EXAMINATIONS*

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In a survey of a representative sample of the Irish adult population (n: 994) respondents were asked in interview their views on a number of issues relating to school examinations. Regarding changes in examinations, a slight majority (56%) believed that a change would be for the better; a large majority (81%) thought that the abolition of Irish as an essential subject to pass examinations was a change for the better, and a smaller majority (57%) that paying teachers bonuses for good pupil-examination results would be a change for the worse. Over two-thirds of respondents thought that public examinations are a fair assessment of what a child has learned at school (69%) and that the skills measured by the examinations matter in later life (67%). Having the Leaving Certificate was seen by majorities of respondents as affecting one's choice of further education (93%), the kind of job one gets (90%), one's promotional prospects (73%), and one's social status (61%), but not the amount of money one makes (52%).

While surveys of public opinion of education are carried out on a regular basis in some countries – for example, Gallup surveys in the United States (1) – such surveys have not been a feature of the Irish system of education. The first major survey in Ireland was carried out in 1974. In the first report of the findings of that survey, opinions on the goals and adequacy of education were described (5). In the present report, we shall describe data on opinions on examinations which were obtained in the same survey. In some questions, respondents were asked about examinations in general; most of the questions, however, related specifically to public examinations.

Two public examinations occupy a key position in the Irish educational system. The course leading to the first of these – the Intermediate Certificate

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— usually lasts three years and is designed to provide ‘a well balanced, general education suitable for pupils who leave full time education at about 16 years of age or, alternatively, who wish to enter on more advanced courses of study’ (4, p 23) The aim of the Leaving Certificate course, which follows the Intermediate Certificate and normally lasts two years, is ‘to prepare pupils for immediate entry into open society or for proceeding to further education’ (4, p 29) The examinations which follow the courses serve as measures of a student’s attainment during the courses and also, particularly the Leaving Certificate, as predictors of future performance An example of the predictive use of the Leaving Certificate examination is to be found in the use of the results of the examination to determine entry to third-level education and to a number of occupations (2)

It is not surprising that both teachers and students have been found to regard examination success and examination-oriented activities as being very important (6) Indeed, public examinations seem to dominate the work of secondary schools even though teachers and students might perceive goals other than examination success (e.g., the development of personal attributes such as confidence and independence) as being educationally more important Dissatisfaction with the influence of public examinations on schools and concern about their appropriateness to assess the attainments of the increasing numbers of students who are entering post primary schools (and who presumably exhibit a wide range of aptitudes, interests, and achievements) have led to recommendations for changes in the system of examinations (3)

In this situation, it is of interest to assess the views on examinations of the general public, many of whom would have experience of such examinations either directly (having taken one themselves) or indirectly (through the experience of their children) Are they aware of changes and suggested changes in the examinations? Do they think changes constitute an improvement? In general, what value do they perceive public examinations to have? Do they think they are a fair assessment of what students have learned? And what effects do they perceive the Leaving Certificate in particular to have? Does having the Leaving Certificate, for example, affect one’s choice of further education, one’s promotion prospects later in life, or one’s social status?

These questions were asked of a representative sample of Irish adults in 1974 The responses of the total sample, together with break downs by parental status (parent/non-parent), place of residence (urban/rural), socio-economic level, and level of formal education, are presented in this paper

METHOD

Interview Schedule

A personal interview schedule was developed at the Educational Research Centre and administered by Irish Marketing Surveys Limited. The part of the interview for which results are reported in this paper was concerned with opinions about changes in examinations, the value of public examinations, and the effects of the Leaving Certificate.

Changes in examinations. Respondents were asked if they had heard or read about any efforts over the last year or so to make changes in school examinations. They could respond by indicating 'yes', 'no', or 'don't know/not sure'. Three specific areas of change were then mentioned ('changing the system of exams', 'the abolition of Irish as an essential subject to pass exams', and 'paying teachers bonuses for good pupil-examination results') and respondents were asked for each area if they thought the change 'was for the better', 'makes no difference', 'was for the worse'; there was also a 'don't know' option.

Perceived value of public examinations. Three questions were asked to elicit respondents' opinions of the value of public examinations. First, they were asked if examinations, such as the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate, are a fair assessment of what a child has learned in school ('yes', 'no', 'don't know'). Secondly, they were asked if the attainments measured by such examinations mattered much in life and they could respond by indicating that 'they matter more than anything else', 'they matter a great deal, but no more than other things', 'they don't matter as much as other things', or 'they matter very little'. (There was also provision for a 'don't know'/'not sure' response.) Thirdly, respondents were asked if they thought that examinations were regarded as being very important by teachers ('few teachers', 'some teachers', 'many teachers', 'most teachers', 'don't know'/'not sure').

Perceived effects of the Leaving Certificate. Respondents were asked to indicate if they thought that having the Leaving Certificate affected what happens to people in later life in five specific areas: 'choice of further education', 'kind of job one gets', 'promotion prospects', 'amount of money one makes', and 'social status'. Respondents indicated their views by saying that the Leaving Certificate 'definitely affects', 'probably affects', 'probably does not affect' or 'definitely does not affect' each of these areas. As in the case of other questions, respondents could reply that they did not know or were not sure.

Sample

A sample of 1,000 adults aged between 16 and 69 years was selected on a quota sampling basis to represent the general public in the Republic of Ireland. A description of the procedure adopted in selecting and weighting the sample is provided elsewhere (5).

After coding and cleaning, it was found that six interviews could not be used. Thus analyses were based on 994 people. Information was not available on the socio economic status of five urban respondents or on the educational level of one rural and 23 urban respondents. The numbers in the analyses by socio economic and educational level are reduced accordingly.

Analysis

The responses of each of the following groups are presented in percentages.

(i) Total sample (n 994)

(ii) Parental status groups (a) Parents of children attending school beyond first class in primary school (n 200 urban, 72 rural), (b) Non-parents respondents who either had no children or whose children were not yet beyond first class in primary school or whose children had already left school (n 497 urban, 225 rural)

(iii) Residence groups (a) Urban respondents living in towns or cities with populations of 1,500 or more inhabitants (n 697), (b) Rural respondents living in areas of population with less than 1,500 inhabitants (n 297)

(iv) Socio-economic level determined on the basis of the occupation of the head of household, not that of the respondent (a) Professional/managerial (n 118 urban, 3 rural), (b) Middle class/white collar (n 149 urban, 10 rural), (c) Skilled worker (n 197, 39 rural), (d) Unskilled worker (n 226 urban, 72 rural), (e) Farmer with 50 or more acres (n 73 rural), (f) Farmer with less than 50 acres (n 2 urban, 100 rural). Categories (a) through (d) are conventionally regarded as constituting an ordinal scale of socio-economic level. While we feel there are differences between these categories and farmers, who are assigned to two separate categories (e and f), it is not clear how the farming categories relate to the scale.

(v) Level achieved at end of formal education (a) Primary school only (n 249 urban, 176 rural), (b) Post-primary school but no public examination (n 112 urban, 47 rural), (c) Group Certificate (n 26 urban, 12 rural), (d) Intermediate Certificate (n 69 urban, 25 rural), (e) Leaving Certificate (n 125 urban, 25 rural), (f) Third-level education (n 93 urban, 11 rural)

RESULTS

Changes in examinations

A minority (45%) of respondents indicated that they had heard or read about efforts to make changes in school examinations (Table 1). A higher

proportion of parents (52%) than of non-parents (43%) said they were aware of such efforts. The most marked sub-group differences were associated with socio-economic and educational level. About one-third (35%) of unskilled workers knew of efforts to introduce changes compared to about two-thirds of the professional-managerial (65%) and white-collar (67%) groups. Similarly there was a steady rise with educational level from one-third (33%) of those with primary education to 71% of those with third-level education saying they had heard of some changes; the only exception to this trend was the group of respondents with the Group Certificate, only 28% of whom were aware of changes.

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGES OF RESPONDENTS WHO HAD HEARD OR READ ABOUT
EFFORTS TO MAKE CHANGES IN SCHOOL EXAMINATIONS

National total		45%	
<i>Parental status</i>	%	<i>Residence</i>	%
Parents	52	Urban	49
Non-parents	43	Rural	41
<i>Socio-economic level</i>	%	<i>Level of formal education</i>	%
Professional/Managerial	65	Primary education	33
White collar	67	Post-primary (no exam)	42
Skilled	43	Group Certificate	28
Unskilled	35	Intermediate Certificate	61
Farmer (50 acres +)	47	Leaving Certificate	66
Farmer (50 acres -)	38	Third level	71

Questions about whether specific changes in examinations would be for the better or the worse elicited three markedly dissimilar sets of responses. For changing the system of examinations, a slight majority (56%) believed this would be for the better (Table 2). Variation in opinion across the socio-economic and educational level sub-groups was quite marked. About three-quarters of the professional/managerial and white collar respondents and of the respondents with the Group Certificate, the Leaving Certificate, or some third-level education believed that changing the system of examinations would be an improvement, while less than half the unskilled workers, small farmers, and respondents with primary education were of this opinion. Almost one in five respondents reported that they were unsure or did not know what the consequences of such change would be.

On the question of the abolition of the need to pass Irish to obtain a certificate, there was a high degree of consensus (81%) that this was a change for the better (Table 3). The view was most frequently expressed among respondents in the professional/managerial (88%) and third-level education (87%) groups.

A majority of the total sample did not agree that paying teachers bonuses for good pupil examination results would be a change for the better (Table 4). A majority of the total sample (57%) and of each of the sub-groups thought it would be a change for the worse. There was somewhat more variation in the responses of the sub-groups to this question than was the case with the question about Irish. This variation was clearly linked to social class and educational level. About 70% of respondents in the higher social and educational groups thought that teacher bonuses would be a change for the worse, that figure gradually and quite regularly reduced to about 50% for the lower groups. Except among the higher socio-economic and educational attainment groups, there was a consistent minority opinion of about 25% that the payment of bonuses would be a change for the better.

Perceived views of public examinations

On the crucial issue of whether public examinations are a fair assessment of what a child has learned at school, about two thirds (69%) of respondents agreed that they are, while almost a third (29%) did not agree (Table 5). This pattern is fairly constant across parental status groups and among urban respondents. Nearer to three-quarters of rural respondents, farmers, and respondents in the two lowest educational attainment groups, however, agreed that public examinations provide a fair assessment of learning, while the figure for the professional/managerial and white-collar groups and for respondents with the Group Certificate, the Leaving Certificate, or third-level education was lower (50 to 60%).

TABLE 2

OPINIONS ON THE EFFECT OF CHANGING
THE SYSTEM OF EXAMINATIONS

	Change for the better	Makes no difference	Change for the worse	Don't know/ Not sure
National total	56	18	6	19
<i>Parental status</i>				
Parents	57	15	7	21
Non-parents	56	19	6	19
<i>Residence</i>				
Urban	61	14	7	18
Rural	51	22	5	21
<i>Socio-economic level</i>				
Professional/Managerial	78	6	6	10
White collar	70	10	5	14
Skilled	60	17	5	18
Unskilled	48	19	10	24
Farmer (50 acres +)	51	30	4	15
Farmer (50 acres -)	49	22	3	26
<i>Level of formal education</i>				
Primary education	43	24	6	27
Post-primary (no exam)	59	13	6	22
Group Certificate	73	14	2	12
Intermediate Certificate	65	19	8	8
Leaving Certificate	75	10	5	9
Third level	76	11	5	8

TABLE 3

OPINIONS ON THE EFFECT OF THE ABOLITION OF IRISH
AS AN ESSENTIAL SUBJECT TO PASS EXAMINATIONS

	Change for the better	Makes no difference	Change for the worse	Don't know/ Not sure
National total	81	7	10	2
<i>Parental status</i>				
Parents	85	4	10	1
Non parents	80	8	10	2
<i>Residence</i>				
Urban	84	5	11	1
Rural	79	10	9	2
<i>Socio economic level</i>				
Professional/Managerial	88	5	6	2
White collar	85	5	8	2
Skilled	80	6	12	1
Unskilled	79	7	12	1
Farmer (50 acres +)	81	11	7	1
Farmer (50 acres -)	79	10	8	3
<i>Level of formal education</i>				
Primary education	79	8	11	2
Post primary (no exam)	83	8	8	1
Group Certificate	78	12	10	0
Intermediate Certificate	84	8	7	2
Leaving Certificate	83	5	12	0
Third level	87	6	5	2

TABLE 4

OPINIONS ON THE EFFECT OF PAYING TEACHERS BONUSES
FOR GOOD PUPIL-EXAMINATION RESULTS

	Change for the better	Makes no difference	Change for the worse	Don't know/ Not sure
National total	24	8	57	11
<i>Parental status</i>				
Parents	25	8	60	8
Non-parents	24	8	56	12
<i>Residence</i>				
Urban	22	8	61	9
Rural	27	8	53	13
<i>Socio-economic level</i>				
Professional/Managerial	14	8	71	7
White collar	25	8	59	8
Skilled	19	9	62	10
Unskilled	26	9	53	11
Farmer (50 acres +)	30	5	53	11
Farmer (50 acres -)	30	5	51	14
<i>Level of formal education</i>				
Primary education	26	8	52	14
Post-primary (no exam)	31	7	51	11
Group Certificate	20	8	57	14
Intermediate Certificate	22	7	67	3
Leaving Certificate	19	9	65	7
Third level	18	6	72	4

TABLE 5

OPINIONS REGARDING WHETHER PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS
ARE A FAIR ASSESSMENT OF WHAT A CHILD HAS LEARNED AT SCHOOL

	Degree of agreement				
	Strongly agree	Agree somewhat	Disagree somewhat	Strongly disagree	Don't know/ Not sure
National total	27	42	18	11	2
<i>Parental status</i>					
Parents	30	39	20	10	1
Non parents	25	43	17	12	3
<i>Residence</i>					
Urban	23	40	18	16	3
Rural	30	44	17	7	1
<i>Socio economic level</i>					
Professional/Managerial	13	46	20	20	2
White collar	19	39	22	20	1
Skilled	23	43	18	13	3
Unskilled	33	36	17	9	5
Farmer (50 acres +)	31	49	15	3	1
Farmer (50 acres -)	30	45	18	7	0
<i>Level of formal education</i>					
Primary education	33	42	15	7	4
Post primary (no exam)	30	42	17	7	3
Group Certificate	22	30	38	10	0
Intermediate Certificate	19	50	17	13	0
Leaving Certificate	16	42	18	23	0
Third level	14	40	26	20	1

When asked how much the kinds of attainment measured by public examinations matter in latter life, 67% of respondents in the total sample and similar percentages in all sub-groups agreed that they 'matter more than anything else' or 'matter a great deal' (Table 6). Only the professional/managerial group and respondents with third-level education deviated from this general opinion; respondents in these groups did not accord the same importance to the attainments measured by public examinations.

Very little variation was found in the perceptions of respondents of the number of teachers who regard examinations as very important. The figures for the total sample (70% said that 'most' teachers and 19% that 'many' teachers regard examinations as very important) were closely replicated in the sub-groups (Table 7). Farmers of more than 50 acres were somewhat more extreme in their views: 98% of them thought that either most or many teachers regard examinations as very important.

Perceived effects of the Leaving Certificate

Seventy-four percent of respondents believed that having the Leaving Certificate 'definitely' affects one's choice of further education; a further 19% believed it 'probably' affects it; only 2% believed that it 'definitely' does not (Table 8). Professional/managerial respondents were the group most likely to perceive the Leaving Certificate as being important (87% said it 'definitely' affects choice of education), while the unskilled respondents were the group least likely to perceive its importance (68% said it 'definitely' affects choice). A similar trend appeared in the views of respondents with varying levels of education. Respondents with the Intermediate Certificate and higher levels of education more frequently opted for the 'definitely' affects category while those with less education more frequently selected the 'probably' affects response.

The Leaving Certificate was considered to have a 'definite' effect on the kind of job one gets by 54% of respondents and a 'probable' effect by a further 36% (Table 9). Parents were more inclined to think it has a definite effect than were non-parents. There was a high degree of agreement with the overall rating across respondents differentiated by socio-economic status; among respondents differentiated by educational level, only those with the Group Certificate and the Leaving Certificate were notably different. While 40% of Group Certificate respondents thought the Leaving Certificate 'definitely' affects the kind of job one gets and 18% thought it 'probably' or 'definitely' does not, 65% of Leaving Certificate respondents thought having the Leaving Certificate has a 'definite' effect.

TABLE 6

OPINIONS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE IN LATER LIFE OF
THE KIND OF ATTAINMENTS MEASURED BY PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS

	It matters more than anything else	It matters a great deal	It does not matter as much as other things	It matters very little	Don't know/ Not sure
National total	19	48	20	11	2
<i>Parental status</i>					
Parents	24	50	17	9	0
Non parents	18	47	21	12	2
<i>Residence</i>					
Urban	15	49	22	12	2
Rural	24	47	19	10	1
<i>Socio economic level</i>					
Professional/Managerial	9	47	27	18	0
White collar	12	52	21	15	1
Skilled	18	50	19	11	1
Unskilled	24	46	17	11	3
Farmer (50 acres +)	23	49	18	8	1
Farmer (50 acres -)	22	45	25	7	1
<i>Level of formal education</i>					
Primary education	25	45	21	7	2
Post primary (no exam)	17	50	20	11	2
Group Certificate	12	57	25	6	0
Intermediate Certificate	15	50	16	19	0
Leaving Certificate	16	50	19	16	0
Third level	8	51	21	21	0

TABLE 7

OPINIONS ON THE NUMBER OF TEACHERS WHO
REGARD EXAMINATIONS AS VERY IMPORTANT

	Few	Some	Many	Most	Don't know/ Not sure
National total	2	8	19	70	1
<i>Parental status</i>					
Parents	3	10	14	72	0
Non-parents	1	7	21	69	1
<i>Residence</i>					
Urban	2	9	19	68	1
Rural	1	7	20	72	0
<i>Socio-economic level</i>					
Professional/Managerial	1	10	20	68	2
White collar	3	10	23	63	2
Skilled	4	6	19	70	0
Unskilled	1	9	17	72	1
Farmer (50 acres +)	1	1	21	77	0
Farmer (50 acres -)	2	10	20	68	0
<i>Level of formal education</i>					
Primary education	2	9	21	67	0
Post-primary (no exam)	2	7	19	72	1
Group Certificate	0	10	26	62	2
Intermediate Certificate	2	3	22	72	1
Leaving Certificate	1	9	12	77	2
Third level	3	10	17	71	0

TABLE 8

OPINIONS ABOUT THE EFFECT OF HAVING THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE
ON CHOICE OF FURTHER EDUCATION

	Definitely affects	Probably affects	Probably does not affect	Definitely does not affect	Don't know/ Not sure
National total	74	19	4	2	1
<i>Parental status</i>					
Parents	78	15	5	1	0
Non parents	73	20	4	3	1
<i>Residence</i>					
Urban	73	19	5	3	1
Rural	76	18	4	2	0
<i>Socio economic level</i>					
Professional/Managerial	87	9	4	0	0
White collar	80	16	2	2	1
Skilled	74	18	6	2	0
Unskilled	68	22	5	3	1
Farmer (50 acres +)	78	18	3	1	0
Farmer (50 acres -)	71	22	4	3	0
<i>Level of formal education</i>					
Primary education	70	21	5	3	1
Post primary (no exam)	71	21	6	1	1
Group Certificate	71	23	2	4	0
Intermediate Certificate	82	15	2	2	0
Leaving Certificate	82	14	2	2	0
Third level	83	12	3	2	0

TABLE 9

OPINIONS ABOUT THE EFFECT OF HAVING THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE
ON THE KIND OF JOB ONE GETS

	Definitely affects	Probably affects	Probably does not affect	Definitely does not affect	Don't know/ Not sure
National total	54	36	7	2	1
<i>Parental status</i>					
Parents	61	29	7	1	1
Non-parents	51	39	7	2	0
<i>Residence</i>					
Urban	53	37	7	3	0
Rural	55	36	7	1	1
<i>Socio-economic level</i>					
Professional/Managerial	60	32	7	0	0
White collar	52	41	5	2	0
Skilled	55	33	8	3	1
Unskilled	52	37	9	2	0
Farmer (50 acres +)	53	37	8	1	0
Farmer (50 acres -)	54	38	5	1	2
<i>Level of formal education</i>					
Primary education	55	37	6	2	1
Post-primary (no exam)	49	36	14	1	0
Group Certificate	40	39	10	8	4
Intermediate Certificate	47	46	5	2	0
Leaving Certificate	65	27	6	2	0
Third level	53	40	5	2	0

TABLE 10

OPINIONS ABOUT THE EFFECT OF HAVING THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE
ON PROMOTION PROSPECTS

	Definitely affects	Probably affects	Probably does not affect	Definitely does not affect	Don't know/ Not sure
National total	35	38	20	5	1
<i>Parental status</i>					
Parents	40	31	24	3	2
Non parents	33	41	19	6	1
<i>Residence</i>					
Urban	32	37	22	7	2
Rural	38	40	18	3	1
<i>Socio-economic level</i>					
Professional/Managerial	26	32	34	6	1
White collar	26	39	23	11	1
Skilled	38	35	20	5	2
Unskilled	38	41	14	5	2
Farmer (50 acres +)	34	38	22	6	0
Farmer (50 acres -)	38	42	19	0	1
<i>Level of formal education</i>					
Primary education	39	41	15	3	2
Post primary (no exam)	35	39	19	5	1
Group Certificate	26	34	30	6	4
Intermediate Certificate	34	44	17	5	0
Leaving Certificate	29	30	31	10	1
Third level	30	30	33	7	1

TABLE 11

OPINIONS ABOUT THE EFFECT OF HAVING THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE
ON SOCIAL STATUS

	Definitely affects	Probably affects	Probably does not affect	Definitely does not affect	Don't know/ Not sure
National total	25	36	22	13	3
<i>Parental status</i>					
Parents	31	32	22	12	3
Non-parents	23	37	23	14	4
<i>Residence</i>					
Urban	24	34	22	16	4
Rural	26	38	23	11	3
<i>Socio-economic level</i>					
Professional/Managerial	14	33	28	24	1
White collar	22	33	24	20	1
Skilled	27	38	20	12	4
Unskilled	30	31	21	11	6
Farmer (50 acres +)	18	40	25	16	1
Farmer (50 acres -)	28	42	22	4	4
<i>Level of formal education</i>					
Primary education	28	38	21	8	5
Post-primary (no exam)	27	35	24	12	2
Group Certificate	24	41	18	12	4
Intermediate Certificate	19	36	25	18	2
Leaving Certificate	25	34	21	19	1
Third level	14	29	29	27	1

TABLE 12

OPINIONS ABOUT THE EFFECT OF HAVING THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE
ON THE AMOUNT OF MONEY ONE MAKES

	Definitely affects	Probably affects	Probably does not affect	Definitely does not affect	Don't know/ Not sure
National total	19	27	29	23	1
<i>Parental status</i>					
Parents	23	25	29	21	2
Non-parents	18	28	29	23	1
<i>Residence</i>					
Urban	18	25	28	27	2
Rural	21	29	31	18	1
<i>Socio economic level</i>					
Professional/Managerial	16	21	31	30	2
White collar	15	30	32	23	0
Skilled	20	25	26	28	1
Unskilled	21	28	28	21	3
Farmer (50 acres +)	18	30	23	29	0
Farmer (50 acres -)	23	28	38	11	1
<i>Level of formal education</i>					
Primary education	21	29	31	17	2
Post primary (no exam)	22	28	25	25	1
Group Certificate	11	28	26	30	4
Intermediate Certificate	11	26	32	31	0
Leaving Certificate	23	23	29	25	1
Third level	14	24	28	32	2

The Leaving Certificate was seen as much less likely to affect promotional prospects. Only 35% of respondents felt that the Leaving Certificate has 'definite' effects on promotion, while a further 38% felt it 'probably' affects promotion (Table 10). These views were fairly consistently held across sub-groups, although professional/managerial and white-collar workers and respondents with the Group Certificate, the Leaving Certificate, or third-level education ascribed even less importance to the Leaving Certificate's effect in this regard than did the general population.

An even greater decline in the perceived impact of having the Leaving Certificate occurred with respect to social status. Only about a quarter of respondents thought that one's social status is 'definitely' affected by having this certificate, and just over a third that it is 'probably' affected (Table 11). Well over a third of the sample, and of most sub-groups, thought one's social status is not affected by having the certificate. The latter opinion was most common among professional/managerial workers (52%), white-collar workers (44%), large farmers (41%), and respondents with the Intermediate Certificate (43%), or with third-level education (56%).

Of all the possible effects about which respondents were asked, the least importance was ascribed to the effect of the Leaving Certificate on the amount of money one makes. About half or more of the total sample (52%) and of every sub-group said there is 'probably' or 'definitely' no such effect (Table 12). Only about 20% thought there is a 'definite' effect; among respondents with the Group or Intermediate Certificate this opinion was held by as few as 11 percent.

DISCUSSION

The opinions of respondents regarding examinations showed considerable agreement on several issues about which questions were asked in this survey. This was particularly so as far as some of the effects of the Leaving Certificate examination were concerned. This examination was perceived by almost all respondents as affecting one's choice of further education (93% said 'definitely' or 'probably') and the kind of job one gets (90% said 'definitely' or 'probably'). Smaller numbers saw the Leaving Certificate as exercising an influence later in life — affecting one's promotional prospects (73% said 'definitely' or 'probably'), one's social status (61% said 'definitely' or 'probably'), and the amount of money one makes (46% said 'definitely' or 'probably'). All in all, the effects of the Leaving Certificate were perceived as considerable.

Given the perceived importance of the Leaving Certificate examination,

it is not surprising that a large majority (89%) of respondents also said that examinations are regarded as very important by most or many teachers. Neither is it surprising that an equally large majority of these respondents, as reported in an earlier paper (5), thought that a level of education to at least the Leaving Certificate is needed by young people today to make a decent living.

Even though the Leaving Certificate was perceived by the vast majority of respondents as having effects which went well beyond the school, there was not consensus among respondents when they were asked if public examinations reflect what a student has learned or if the kinds of attainment measured by examinations are really significant in later life. While a majority (69%) did agree that public examinations are a fair assessment of what a child has learned in school, only 27% expressed 'strong' agreement with this view, 29% disagreed with it. Again, while a similar majority (67%) thought that the kinds of attainment measured by public examinations matter a great deal in later life, a substantial minority (31%) did not think so.

Given the perceived importance of public examinations, it is perhaps surprising that a minority (45%) of respondents had heard or read about efforts to make changes in the examination system. It is not surprising, however, given the number who could not recall having heard or read about changes in examinations, that a fairly large number (19%) said they did not know or were not sure what the effect of changing the system of examinations might be.

Although only a small majority (56%) thought that the effect of changing the system of examinations, in general, would be a change for the better, when a precise change was mentioned — the abolition of Irish as an essential subject to obtain a certificate — a considerable majority (81%) agreed that the change was for the better. The hypothetical change of paying teachers bonuses for good pupil examination results was viewed with less enthusiasm, more than half (57%) the respondents thought it would be a change for the worse, though a substantial minority (24%) thought it would be a change for the better.

Variation between groups which comprise the total sample was not as great for opinions about examinations as it was in the case of opinions about the goals and adequacy of education reported in an earlier paper (5). Differences in opinion between parents and non parents were slight for all the issues relating to examinations. Likewise, there were no differences

between urban and rural respondents, with the possible exception of a tendency for rural respondents to perceive strong effects as being associated with the Leaving Certificate.

Respondents in higher socio-economic classes and with higher levels of education were much more likely to report having heard about proposed changes than were respondents in lower socio-economic and educational categories. Higher proportions of the former also believed that a change in the system of examinations in general would be an improvement but they were less likely to believe that the payment of bonuses for examination results would be a desirable innovation. Respondents in the social-class and educational-level groupings which had reported the lowest degrees of acquaintance with proposed changes in examinations were, not surprisingly, more likely to say that they did not know what the effects of general changes in the system or of the payment of bonuses to teachers might be.

We have seen that over two-thirds of the total sample perceived public examinations to be a fair assessment of what is learned at school and thought that the kinds of attainment measured by examinations are of considerable significance in later life. Differences between sub-groups relating to these issues, however, were in evidence. Much smaller percentages of respondents who themselves had been educated to at least Leaving Certificate standard strongly agreed that public examinations are a fair assessment of school learning; even smaller percentages of professional/managerial respondents and respondents with some third-level education judged that the kinds of attainment measured by public examinations matter more in later life than anything else. These findings are in keeping with a tendency noted when opinions on the goals and adequacy of education were elicited for those with higher levels of education to be most critical of the system (5).

Opinions about the impact during later life of having the Leaving Certificate varied for the different effects about which questions were asked. The most highly educated respondents and those in the higher socio-economic groups were more definite in their view that having the Leaving Certificate affects one's choice of further education. For more remote affects, however, — effects on promotion, social status, and money earned — there was a tendency for the more highly educated to judge that the impact is less than, rather than greater than, that ascribed by other groups.

As in the case of public opinion about the goals and adequacy of Irish schools and education (5), the Group Certificate respondents show some

interesting deviations in their responses to some of the questions on examinations. Whatever the reason for this, it is of some interest that they are exceptionally inclined to judge that changes in the examination system would be for the better, that public examinations are not a fair assessment of school learning, and that having the Leaving Certificate does not have quite as great an impact on the job one gets, one's promotional prospects, or the money one earns as some other respondents think, at the same time, they do agree with other groups that having the Leaving Certificate has an effect on one's social status.

The impression with which we are left from these data is that the Irish public is more thoroughly convinced of the effect of the Leaving Certificate examination than it is of its effectiveness. The impact of having this examination on choice of education and job is acknowledged by a far greater number of people than are its fairness as a reflection of past learning and its relevance for future performance. Moreover, this gap in perceptions of effect and effectiveness is greatest among people who themselves have higher levels of formal education and jobs of higher social standing. It is not surprising that people in these groups are also more likely than those in other groups to hold the view that schools place too much emphasis on the preparation of students for public examinations (5). We might expect that support for changes in the examination system in the future would be most likely to come from such groups.

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