

leaving at 16

**a study of factors affecting young people's
decision to leave full-time education**

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PREFACE

In November 1996, the NFER embarked on a one-year study of the factors that affect young people's decisions about post-16 education. The research was carried out as part of the NFER's 1996/7 Membership Programme of research, which is funded by the Council of Local Education Authorities (CLEA). The project focused on two key aspects: the decision to stay on or leave full-time education at the age of 16; and, if staying on, the choice of course and institution. Concerning the second of these, the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) worked collaboratively with the NFER and contributed towards the funding of this part of the research. Two reports have arisen from the research; these have been written to provide complementary information. Those with an interest in young people's decisions about post-16 education and the factors that affect young people's choices will find much of value in both reports.

This report is about young people who intended to leave full-time education at the age of 16. It begins by focusing on who these people were in terms of gender, social class and expected educational achievement. The report then moves on to examine the reasons for their decision to leave full-time education and the factors that may have influenced them, including their attitudes towards school and their views on careers education and guidance. The report's main emphasis is on exploring the factors that can be influenced by changes in policy and practice. As such it will be of particular interest to all those who are keen to further young people's post-16 educational opportunities, in particular those working in schools, LEAs, and careers services as well as parents.

The second report is about young people who had decided to stay on in full-time education after the age of 16. It is based on findings from students already in different types of post-16 education: school sixth forms; sixth-form colleges; and FE colleges. It focuses on their reasons for deciding to stay on in full-time education, the factors that affected their choice of course and institution, the careers education and guidance that they received and their early impressions of whether the course was matching their expectations. It provides hard evidence of the factors that influence students' choices about post-16 provision and will therefore be of particular interest to everyone involved with young people around this crucial transition point in their lives. *Staying On: A Study of Young People's Decisions About School Sixth Forms, Sixth-Form Colleges and Colleges of Further Education* (Keys *et al.*, 1998) is available from the NFER Communications Unit, price £8.

A third publication in this series is entitled *Staying or Leaving? A Literature Review of Factors Affecting the Take-up of Post-16 Options*. It focuses on qualitative and quantitative research carried out in this country about decisions concerning post-16 destination and covers the period between 1988 and 1997. It is available from the NFER Communications Unit, price £5.

1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Studies of the factors affecting the choices young people make at the end of their compulsory schooling have largely focused on one of three main aspects. Firstly, a considerable body of research has examined the home background of young people, exploring the impact of their social class, gender and ethnicity on their post-16 destinations. Secondly, in the last decade, studies have focused on the contribution of individual schools to the qualifications obtained by young people at 16, and their subsequent destinations. These have indicated that, although the family background and ability of students are major determinants of achievement levels and post-16 choice, schools in similar circumstances can have very different impacts on their students. Thirdly, some studies have examined the effect of wider influences such as the local and national economic climate and specific educational reforms on the choices young people make.

◆ Academic attainment

There has been widespread agreement amongst researchers that the level of academic qualifications a young person achieves at the end of compulsory education is closely linked with the subsequent destination. For example, Gray *et al.* (1993) argued that:

the formal qualifications young people obtain in the examinations they sit at the end of their period of compulsory schooling are overwhelmingly the most powerful predictors of further educational participation. In general, we have found the relationships to be linear ones. The better their qualifications the more likely a person is to stay on (p.4).

In addition to predicting the likelihood of leaving full-time education or staying, it is clear that attainment is strongly correlated with destinations within each of these two routes. Payne (1995) concluded that:

GCSE results are the biggest single influence on staying on rates... In the labour market, they affect the chances of getting an apprenticeship, a full-time job or a non-apprenticeship place on YT [Youth Training], and there is a clear hierarchy between these three routes in terms of the average GCSE results of young people on each (p. v).

◆ Social class

Numerous studies have demonstrated that attainment at the age of 16 is positively correlated with social class. Drew's (1995) analysis of the Youth Cohort Study data revealed that a student's socio-economic group was more important than gender or ethnicity in predicting attainment at 16, while Lynn (1996) found similar results amongst young people completing their compulsory education in Scotland. Given the strong relationships found between attainment and post-16 destination, discussed above, it is likely that social class will also be strongly associated with post-16 choice.

Furthermore, when researchers have controlled for academic attainment, social class has been shown to have had an influence on post-16 destination. Cheng's (1995) analysis of data from the Youth Cohort Study, for young people who completed their compulsory schooling in 1989–90, revealed that amongst pupils with similar GCSE results, those with parents who had high-status jobs and good qualifications were more likely to stay on in full-time education than their peers.

Similarly, there is some evidence that the *aspirations* of young people are influenced by social class. Penn and Scattergood (1992) found that the young people in their study from middle-class families were much more likely to seek professional jobs and higher education than their peers from working-class backgrounds, regardless of which schools they attended, and pupils with fathers in manual jobs had a greater likelihood of aiming for similar jobs themselves. However, the authors did not link the relative levels of achievement of the pupils in their sample with their expectations. It is possible, therefore, that the differences

could be explained, or certainly strongly influenced, by realistic expectations of different levels of attainment at the end of compulsory schooling.

◆ Gender

Differences in attainment

Numerous studies have documented the differential performance of boys and girls during primary and secondary school (for example: Stobart *et al.*, 1992; Elwood, 1995; Warrington and Younger, 1996; Murphy and Elwood, 1997) and, given the correlation between academic attainment and post-16 destination, it is unsurprising that there are strong gender differences in the proportions of young people who choose to remain in full-time education and who leave. For example, data from the Youth Cohort Study indicated that in 1996, 75 per cent of 16-year-old women were pursuing full-time education, but only 68 per cent of 16-year-old men were doing the same (GB. DFEE, 1997). Many researchers and policy makers have sought to explain these differences, suggesting, for example, that boys and girls experience different processes of socialisation in schools (Mac an Ghail, 1994) and that teacher expectations of boys and girls may be different (Elwood, 1995).

Differences in staying-on rates, independent of attainment

However, Cheng's (1995) analysis of the Youth Cohort Study revealed that, even when attainment in GCSE had been taken into consideration, girls had higher staying-on rates than boys. Similar patterns of gender participation in post-16 education and training were found in Northern Ireland (McWhirter *et al.*, 1988) and in Scotland (Raffe *et al.*, 1994). Amongst those who chose to leave school at 16, McWhirter *et al.* revealed that men were more likely than women to gain full-time jobs on completing their compulsory education, but were also more likely to be unemployed.

A number of studies have suggested that these differences may be determined at an early age: Keys *et al.* (1995) asked pupils in the final year of primary school and first year of secondary school whether or not they thought they would remain at school or college after the age of 16. Girls, in both phases of schooling, were more likely than boys to intend to remain in education and were less likely to intend to leave school as soon as possible.

◆ Ethnicity

Entry to the labour market

Studies have indicated that while young people from ethnic minorities were more likely than their white peers to remain in full-time education after the age of 16 (Drew, 1995; GB. DFEE, 1997), white youths were more likely than young people from other ethnic groups to move directly into employment. Drew *et al.* (1992) revealed that 19 per cent of white school leavers gained a full-time job at the end of their compulsory schooling, compared with five per cent of their Asian peers and eight per cent of African Caribbeans.

Participation in the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) also differed considerably between ethnic groups. Asian young people were generally under-represented and, when other factors were taken into account including attainment at 16, African Caribbeans were the most likely to take up YTS places (Drew, 1995). Similar ethnic differences were revealed by Saunders *et al.* (1997) in their study of young people on Modern Apprenticeships, 92 per cent of whom were white.

Ethnicity has also been shown to affect the likelihood of a young person being unemployed at the end of compulsory schooling (Roberts *et al.* 1992; The Runnymede Trust, 1996; Whitmarsh and Harris/ Office for National Statistics, 1996). Drew (1995) stated that:

whatever the level of educational attainment, there were barriers to progress for ethnic minority young people; African Caribbeans and Asians were more likely to become unemployed and less likely to find full-time jobs (p. 187).

Possible explanations for these differences

In seeking to explain these differences in post-16 destinations, researchers have pointed to cultural differences between ethnic groups and differences in their perceptions of the value of education (Basit, 1996; Lightbody *et al.*, 1997). Others have concentrated on the way the education system, generally, impacts upon different ethnic groups (Gillborn, 1997), on the influence of teachers' expectations (Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Sewell, 1997; Wrench *et al.*, 1996) and on discrimination in advice provided by the careers service (Cross *et al.*, 1990; Wrench, 1990).

◆ Influence of the school

Although the family background and ability of students continue to be recognised as major determinants of achievement levels, and thus post-16 destinations, research has demonstrated that schools in similar social circumstances can achieve very different levels of educational progress (for example: Cheng, 1995; Creemers, 1994; Fergusson and Unwin, 1996; Mortimore *et al.*, 1988; Nuttall *et al.*, 1989; Smith and Tomlinson, 1989). However, a relatively small number of studies have focused specifically on the choices made by young people at 16. One such study, conducted by Gray *et al.* (1993), which examined post-16 participation in full-time education, did reveal substantial differences between schools. Amongst pupils with similar qualification levels, some schools were found to 'boost' participation and others to 'depress' it, amounting to a variance of ten per cent.

Similarly, Paterson and Raffe's (1995) study of those who stayed on in full-time education in Scotland found that the propensity to stay on, of both high and low achievers, depended on which school they had attended. In other words, the influence of the school seemed to have been a major factor. Interestingly, this propensity was found to a greater extent among middle-class males than females or working-class males.

Studies have not been able to firmly identify the reasons for these differences between schools. However, researchers have suggested that in some schools, a distinct culture of staying on operates, affecting the decisions young people make at the end of their compulsory schooling (Fergusson and Unwin, 1996). Positive associations have also been found between the staying-on rate and school characteristics such as the rate of teacher turnover in a school (Cheng, 1995).

◆ Careers advice

A number of studies have outlined the sources of advice used by young people as they decide what to do at the end of their compulsory schooling (for example: Foskett and Hesketh, 1997; Witherspoon, 1995) but, once background characteristics were controlled for, these have not provided evidence that careers guidance had any direct effect on young

people's destinations. Howieson and Croxford (1996) revealed that although careers education and guidance had only a very limited effect on post-16 destination, for some young people who chose to leave full-time education at 16, it did have a positive impact, increasing the likelihood that they would be satisfied with their job or training scheme, for example.

Furthermore, while studies have not demonstrated that careers education and guidance has had a direct impact on the actual destinations of young people at the end of their compulsory schooling, recent research has indicated that good careers education and guidance has given students increased confidence in their decision-making abilities (Courtenay and McAleese, 1993), a high level of careers-related skills (Morris *et al.*, 1995) and an increased sense of satisfaction with their post-16 choices (Saunders *et al.*, 1996).

◆ Effect of unemployment/types of employment

Research indicates that the impact of national levels of unemployment on participation in post-16 education and training has varied over the past ten years. In England during the late 1980s, staying-on rates increased despite a decrease in national unemployment levels (Gray *et al.*, 1993; Cheng; 1995; Jesson *et al.*, 1991). However, it is likely that the subsequent levelling off of participation rates in post-compulsory education between 1994 and 1996 was due to improvements in economic conditions and the greater availability of jobs for young people, especially as the fall was largely among those with lower-grade GCSEs and no qualifications, a group which has traditionally been more likely to enter the labour market at 16 than those with higher-level qualifications (GB. DFEE, 1997).

Furthermore, some studies have indicated that local unemployment rates were positively correlated with the take-up of YTS places in England (Jesson *et al.*, 1991; Roberts and Chadwick, 1991). Mizen (1995) found that those who entered YTS did so only reluctantly after it became clear that 'finding a real job was nearly impossible' (p. 90) given high levels of national unemployment and repeated unsuccessful applications for jobs.

The type of work available in the local labour market has also been shown to have had some impact on young people's decisions whether or not to stay on in full-time education. Cheng (1995) revealed higher staying-on rates in areas with larger proportions of people working in the service industries and speculated that this may have been because young people perceived a link between good qualifications and good jobs in these industries. Alternatively, Cheng suggested, young people may have been encouraged to stay on because the type of vocational qualifications required in local service industries could be obtained through full-time education rather than through work-based training.

◆ Local differences in post-16 destinations

Disparities have also been found between LEAs (Gray *et al.*, 1993; Smith and Noble, 1995), with participation rates in post-compulsory education ten per cent higher in some than in others. This can be explained partially by the difference in the socio-economic backgrounds and academic achievements of the young people but, even when these variables had been controlled for, some variation between LEAs persisted.

A number of studies have compared the destinations of young people in rural and urban areas (Gray *et al.*, 1989; Sime *et al.*, 1990; Wallace *et al.*, 1993). Although a large proportion of the differences that emerged were explained by the different socio-economic status of the two groups, young people from inner cities who left school at 16 were less likely than their counterparts in other areas to gain a full-time job immediately (Gray *et al.*, 1989). Furthermore, Wallace *et al.* (1993) claimed that young people in rural areas were more likely than their peers in urban areas to enter a full-time job or YTS and much less likely than other young people to stay on at school and study for academic qualifications, suggesting that this may have been as a result of employers' low evaluation of qualifications and the predominance of manual work in the region. The authors also cited transport as a key problem for many in sparsely populated rural areas which, in some cases, limited access to education, employment and training.

◆ Influence of educational reforms

Qualification levels of young people increased considerably in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Ashford *et al.*, 1993), and many have attributed this to new forms of assessment introduced with the GCSE in 1988. As discussed above, the higher a young person's level of academic attainment, the more likely they are to continue in full-time education after the age of 16. Thus, the increasing levels of qualification from the late 1980s onwards enabled more young people to stay on in post-compulsory education. It has also been suggested, from analysis of Youth Cohort data, that the GCSE engendered more positive attitudes towards school among young people, which consequently encouraged them to continue their education beyond the age of 16 (Gray *et al.*, 1993).

The introduction of GNVQs in 1992 also affected the choices of young people at the end of their compulsory schooling, offering a vocational alternative to those who wished to remain in full-time education but did not want to study for A-levels. However, one study claimed that they 'were essentially a reactive response to increasing participation rates rather than an incentive to increased participation or achievement' (Hodgson and Spours, 1997, p. 6).

It is likely that increased participation rates in post-16 education have also been influenced by reforms to the higher education system. In the early 1990s, the Government encouraged expansion through a number of different strategies such as providing increased funds to higher education institutions and developing more vocationally relevant higher education in the hope that these would allow more people from different sectors of society the opportunity to enter higher education and thus provide greater numbers of highly educated people to meet the demands of the economy (Connor *et al.*, 1996). Between 1988 and 1992, during the peak years for expansion in the United Kingdom, the number of students enrolled on higher education courses increased by 42 per cent, thus giving those who chose to remain in full-time education at the age of 16 an increased chance of moving into higher education. These opportunities were increased by a certain amount of 'spare capacity' in higher education over the same period, as the size of the relevant cohort had fallen (Hillman, 1994).

◆ Summary

Numerous studies have highlighted the correlations between a young person's characteristics, such as social class, ethnicity and gender, and their likelihood of participating in full-time education, training or employment at the end of their compulsory schooling. Research has also been conducted to try to uncover the reasons for these correlations by, for example, exploring socialisation processes at home and at school. However, there has been less emphasis on establishing the reasons for the differences in participation rates *between schools*. Although the literature on school effectiveness and school improvement has engaged with many of the factors which help determine attainment at 16, few quantitative or qualitative studies have been able to establish what underpins the 'staying-on' culture in some schools.

1.2 Research details

◆ Aims

This report presents the findings from a one-year study of the factors that affect young people's decisions about post-16 education. The project had three main aims:

1. to identify the factors that influence young people's decisions about staying on or leaving full-time education beyond the statutory minimum leaving age;
2. to focus, in particular, on the reasons why certain groups within the youth population decide to leave full-time education at the age of 16;
3. to identify aspects of good practice in the provision of advice to young people on careers and post-16 education and training.

◆ Funding

The study was carried out by the NFER as part of its 1996/97 Membership Programme of research, which is funded mainly through local authority contributions. The Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) worked collaboratively with the NFER and part-funded that part of the research that focused specifically on students already in post-16 provision. Two reports have arisen from the study (see Preface).

◆ Developmental phase

Phase 1 was a brief period at the start of the research which involved group and individual interviews with secondary school pupils in Years 8, 11 and 12 from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Findings from these interviews helped to inform decisions about the focus of the research, key questions and survey design.

◆ The surveys

Phase 2 involved questionnaire surveys in January 1997 of over 2,000 Year 8 and Year 11 pupils in 42 maintained secondary schools (with and without sixth forms) in England. In addition, each participating school was asked to complete a questionnaire providing background information on pupils, catchment area, school features and the local employment situation. A total of 821 Year 11 questionnaires and 863 Year 8 pupil questionnaires were returned — a 75 per cent response from each year group.¹ However, four schools did not return *any* questionnaires, which means that the response from those schools that did participate was actually much higher than this (approximately 90 per cent).

Pupils' questionnaire responses revealed that many more were intending to *continue* in full-time education after the age of 16 (600 Year 11 pupils and 513 Year 8 pupils) than were intending to *leave* full-time education (207 Year 11 pupils and 321 Year 8 pupils), particularly so among Year 11 pupils — a ratio of approximately 3:1. Also it was found that pupils who were intending to leave had different characteristics in terms of gender, social class and expected examination results than those intending to continue their full-time education. These aspects are described in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 describes differences between pupils intending to leave and pupils intending to continue in full-time education in terms of careers information and guidance, while in Chapter 4 the attention switches to pupils' attitudes: towards school in general; and staying on in particular, again examining the

¹ However, some questionnaires were excluded from the analysis because pupils did not provide enough information about themselves, e.g. gender, parental occupation, expected achievement, to render their responses useful. Therefore the tables are based on 807 Year 11 questionnaires and 834 Year 8 questionnaires.

differences that emerged between the 'leavers' and 'stayers'. In order to make useful comparisons between these two groups of pupils, the responses of those intending to continue in full-time education were *weighted* for gender, parental occupation and academic expectations, which allows the report to focus on differences *other* than these three characteristics. This process is explained more fully at the start of Chapter 3.

◆ Interview programme

Phase 3 of the research took place between May and July 1997. It involved follow-up interviews with 33 Year 11 pupils who completed a questionnaire: 16 who were intending to stay on in full-time education and 17 who were intending to leave at the end of Year 11. These interviews were designed to extend and illuminate the questionnaire data, allowing exploration of some of the key issues associated with the decision to stay on or leave full-time education at 16.

2: THE DECISION TO LEAVE FULL-TIME EDUCATION

I've been doing schoolwork for too long now. I don't want to sit behind a desk all day any more.

(Year 11 pupil)

I knew I'd rather work in an office than do anything else... [it's] quite easy work, there's room for promotion and it's good money.

(Year 11 pupil)

This chapter focuses on the decision to leave full-time education. Which pupils decide to follow this route and what reasons do they have for doing so? Pupils intending to leave represented a substantial proportion of the questionnaire respondents: approximately one-quarter of Year 11 pupils and almost 40 per cent of Year 8 pupils indicated on the questionnaire that they were intending to leave. The chapter begins by comparing the gender, parental occupation and expected academic achievement of these pupils with those who were planning to continue. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the pupils who were intending to leave — their reasons for deciding to leave school and their career plans for the end of Year 11. The chapter is based mainly on questionnaire data. Gender differences and differences between Year 11 and Year 8 pupils are only reported in the text if these were found to be statistically significant (all data are presented in the tables). The chapter also draws on information from follow-up interviews with Year 11 pupils to illustrate some of the key issues emerging.

2.1 Who leaves full-time education at 16?

◆ How many pupils intend to leave?

Questionnaire responses revealed that approximately one-quarter of Year 11 pupils were intending to leave full-time education at 16. Interestingly a much higher proportion of Year 8 pupils (38 per cent) said they planned to leave full-time education at 16 (Table 2.1). This difference between the year groups was statistically significant.

◆ Gender differences

Among Year 11 boys, 31 per cent were planning to leave full-time education at 16, while only 20 per cent of Year 11 girls were intending to leave (Table 2.1). A similar picture emerged among pupils in Year 8, with a higher proportion of boys (44 per cent) than girls (32 per cent) intending to leave. These gender differences between 'leavers' and 'stayers' were statistically significant.¹

Table 2.1 Gender differences between pupils intending to leave and pupils intending to continue in full-time education

	YEAR 11 *			YEAR 8 *		
	Boys	Girls	Boys and Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys and Girls
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Pupils intending to leave full-time education at 16	31	20	26	44	32	38
Pupils intending to continue full-time education	69	80	74	56	68	62
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Percentages are based on the number of pupils:

Year 11 pupils planning to leave = 207 and planning to continue = 600;

Year 8 pupils planning to leave = 321 and planning to continue = 513.

* Indicates that the difference between Year 11 boys and girls intending to leave full-time education is statistically significant at a level <0.05.

¹ Throughout this report, gender differences and differences between Year 11 and Year 8 are only reported in the text if they are statistically significant. In tables, an * indicates where this is the case.

◆ Parental occupation

Pupils were asked to write the occupation of their parents or guardians. Their responses, taking the higher status parent, were categorised into six categories using the Standard Occupational Classification system (GB. OPCS, 1990). These categories were combined to give three broad categories: professional, managerial and technical; skilled manual; and partly-skilled/unskilled manual (Tables 2.2 and 2.3).

Year 11 pupils

Between pupils intending to leave full-time education and pupils intending to continue, there were statistically significant differences in terms of parental occupation status (Table 2.2). Taking boys and girls together, almost twice as many pupils intending to continue were from *professional, managerial or technical* backgrounds (34 per cent compared with 18 per cent). Reinforcing this image of those staying on coming from higher social class backgrounds, it was found that far more pupils intending to leave were from *partly-skilled or unskilled manual* backgrounds (29 per cent of those leaving compared with only 19 per cent of those intending to continue in full-time education).

No gender differences emerged, in relation to parental occupation, between Year 11 boys and girls intending to leave. However, among Year 11 pupils intending to continue full-time education it was found that boys tended to come from higher social backgrounds than girls. Significantly more boys (38 per cent) than girls (29 per cent) were from *professional, managerial or technical* backgrounds while fewer boys (16 per cent) than girls (22 per cent) were from *partly-skilled/unskilled manual* backgrounds (Table 2.2).

Year 8 pupils

Not surprisingly, Year 8 pupils' parental occupation analyses revealed a similar pattern to that found among Year 11 pupils (Table 2.3). Again there was a clear leaning towards higher parental employment status among pupils in the 'staying on' category, mirrored by a clear leaning towards lower parental employment status among pupils in the 'leaving' category. Taking boys and girls together, twice as many Year 8 pupils

Table 2.2 Occupations of parents of Year 11 pupils

	YEAR 11 *					
	Planning to LEAVE			Planning to CONTINUE		
	Boys	Girls	Boys and Girls	Boys [#]	Girls [#]	Boys and Girls
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Professional, managerial and technical	17	19	18	38	29	34
Skilled manual	28	34	30	30	38	34
Partly-skilled/unskilled manual	28	31	29	16	22	19
<i>Other or occupation unknown</i>	27	16	23	16	11	14
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	101

Percentages are based on the number of Year 11 pupils:

planning to leave full-time education = 207; and planning to continue = 600.

* Indicates that the difference between Year 11 pupils planning to leave full-time education and pupils planning to continue is statistically significant at a level <0.05.

Indicates that the difference between boys and girls intending to continue is statistically significant at a level <0.05.

Due to rounding, some column totals may not add up to 100.

Table 2.3 Occupations of parents of Year 8 pupils

	YEAR 8 *					
	Planning to LEAVE			Planning to CONTINUE		
	Boys [#]	Girls [#]	Boys and Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys and Girls
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Professional, managerial and technical	20	12	17	35	33	34
Skilled manual	32	35	34	32	38	35
Partly-skilled/unskilled manual	33	27	31	24	20	22
<i>Other or occupation unknown</i>	15	26	19	9	10	9
TOTAL	100	100	101	100	101	100

Percentages are based on the number of Year 8 pupils:

planning to leave full-time education = 321; and planning to continue = 513.

* Indicates that the difference between pupils planning to leave full-time education and pupils planning to continue is statistically significant at a level <0.05.

Indicates that the difference between boys and girls planning to leave is statistically significant at a level <0.05.

Due to rounding, some column totals may not add up to 100.

intending to continue were from *professional, managerial or technical* backgrounds (34 per cent compared with 17 per cent). Reinforcing this image of those staying on coming from higher social class backgrounds, it was found that far more pupils intending to leave were from *partly-skilled or unskilled manual* backgrounds (31 per cent of those leaving compared with only 22 per cent of those intending to continue in full-time education). The differences between Year 8 boys and Year 8 girls intending to leave were statistically significant, though this finding is complicated by the higher percentage of girls leaving whose parental occupation was not known.

◆ Expected academic achievement

The formal qualifications that pupils obtain at the end of compulsory schooling have been found to be the most powerful predictor of further educational participation whereby the better the qualifications, the more likely is a young person to continue (see for example, Gray *et al.*, 1993). In this research, pupils had not yet taken formal qualifications so pupils in Year 11 were asked to indicate what GCSE grades they expected to achieve and pupils in Year 8 were asked to indicate how good they felt they were at school work. Whether or not their self-assessments were accurate, it is interesting to see the relationship between pupils' own perceptions of their academic ability and their decisions about post-16 full-time education.

Year 11 pupils

The vast majority (85 per cent) of Year 11 pupils who were planning to leave fell into the broadly defined category of expected academic achievement level 2 (i.e. they were expecting *mostly grades D–G, a mixture of grades, or mostly ungraded* results). The remainder (just 15 per cent) were in category 1 (i.e. expecting *mostly A–C grades*).² In contrast, as might have been expected, among pupils intending to continue in full-time education the majority (62 per cent) fell into category 1, while only 38 per cent were in category 2 (Table 2.4). These differences were statistically significant.

² Pupils were asked to estimate how well they would do in their GCSEs by ticking one of the following: *mostly grades A–C; mostly grades D–G; a mixture of grades A–G; mostly ungraded*. In order to make useful comparisons between high and low achievers, pupils were then categorised into two groups: **expected academic achievement level 1**, which included pupils who had estimated *mostly grades A–C*, and **expected academic achievement level 2**, which included pupils who had estimated *mostly grades D–G, a mixture of grades or mostly ungraded* results.

Table 2.4 Year 11 pupils' predictions about their external examination results

	YEAR 11 *					
	Planning to LEAVE			Planning to CONTINUE		
	Boys	Girls	Boys and Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys and Girls
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Expected academic achievement level 1	17	12	15	67	57	62
Expected academic achievement level 2	83	88	85	33	43	38
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Percentages are based on the number of Year 11 pupils:

planning to leave full-time education = 207; and planning to continue = 600.

Pupils who did not indicate expected academic achievement were excluded from the analysis (see footnote in Chapter 1, p.10).

* Indicates that the difference between Year 11 pupils planning to leave full-time education and pupils planning to continue is statistically significant at a level <0.05.

Indicates that the difference between boys and girls planning to continue is statistically significant at a level <0.05.

Furthermore, among Year 11 pupils planning to continue in full-time education, there were significantly more boys with an expected academic achievement level 1 (67 per cent) than girls (57 per cent). No such gender differences emerged between Year 11 boys and girls intending to leave full-time education at 16 (Table 2.4).

Year 8 pupils

Year 8 pupils, who were still some years away from external examinations, were asked to grade how good they thought they were at school work by ticking: *very good, above average, average, below average* or *not at all good*. Their responses were then categorised into two groups: **perceived academic ability 1**, which included those judging themselves to be in the top two categories; or **perceived academic ability 2**, which included those pupils who judged themselves to be *average, below average* or *not at all good*.

As with Year 11 pupils, those planning to leave full-time

education had commonly graded themselves as average or below average (**perceived academic ability level 2**) (Table 2.5). Around three-quarters of 'leavers' fell into this category. In contrast, those Year 8 pupils planning to continue were more evenly divided, with just under half (47 per cent) falling into the above average category (**perceived academic ability level 1**), and just over half (53 per cent) claiming to be average or below average (**perceived academic ability level 2**). These differences were statistically significant. However, no gender differences emerged among Year 8 pupils planning to leave with respect to perceived academic ability. Similarly, among those planning to continue, no differences were found between boys and girls.

Table 2.5 Year 8 pupils' perceptions of their academic ability

	YEAR 8 *					
	Planning to LEAVE			Planning to CONTINUE		
	Boys	Girls	Boys and Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys and Girls
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Perceived academic ability level 1	28	24	26	48	45	47
Perceived academic ability level 2	72	76	74	52	55	53
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Percentages are based on the number of Year 8 pupils:

planning to leave full-time education = 321; and planning to continue = 513.

Pupils who did not indicate academic ability were excluded from the analysis (see footnote in Chapter 1, p.10).

* *Indicates that the difference between pupils planning to leave full-time education and pupils planning to continue is statistically significant at a level <0.05.*

An overview of the pupils intending to leave full-time education in terms of their gender, parental occupation and expected academic achievement can be seen in Appendix 2, Table A2.1 (Year 11) and Table A2.2 (Year 8).

2.2 Career plans

◆ What pupils will be doing when they leave school

Year 11 pupils

Year 11 pupils who were intending to leave school at the end of the year were asked to indicate, from a list of possible options, what they were most likely to be doing the following year (Table 2.6). The majority (64 per cent) of those not intending to continue said that *a full-time job which includes training* was the most likely option. Most of the remaining pupils who were intending to leave indicated that they would like to be *in a job* (i.e. without training). None of those intending to leave envisaged being *unemployed*. Year 11 pupils were not given the option of saying *I don't know* but were asked to give the *most likely* option of those listed.

The difference between the way girls and boys answered this question was statistically significant (Table 2.6). A higher proportion of Year 11 girls anticipated having *a full-time job that includes training* (69 per cent of girls compared with 60 per cent of boys) while a higher proportion of boys did not anticipate being in a job with training (33 per cent of boys compared with 20 per cent of girls).

Year 8 pupils

The responses of Year 8 pupils differed somewhat from those of Year 11 (Table 2.6). Less than 40 per cent envisaged having *a full-time job that includes training*. Moreover, there were no significant gender differences. However, Year 8 pupils, unlike Year 11 pupils, had the opportunity to tick *don't know* in response to this question. One-fifth of them had not made up their minds what they would be doing when they left full-time education.

Table 2.6 What Year 8 and Year 11 pupils said they would be doing when they left school at 16

	YEAR 11			YEAR 8		
	Boys*	Girls*	Boys and Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys and Girls
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Full-time job with training	60	69	64	35	43	39
In a job	33	20	28	29	33	31
Staying at home	2	3	2	0	2	1
Self-employed	2	0	1	6	2	4
Unemployed	0	0	0	0	1	1
Other	2	5	3	4	0	2
Don't know (Year 8 only)	N/A	N/A	N/A	22	17	20
No response	1	3	2	4	2	2
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Percentages are based on the number of pupils who were planning to leave full-time education:
Year 11 = 207; Year 8 = 321.

* Indicates that the difference between Year 11 boys and Year 11 girls is statistically significant at a level <0.05 (i.e. Year 11 only).

◆ Chosen job or careers

Year 11 pupils were asked if they knew what job or career they would like to have. As Table 2.7 shows, the majority had made up their minds, though interestingly fewer of those intending to leave at 16 (63 per cent) than those intending to continue (73 per cent).

Year 11 pupils were asked to indicate what type of job their preference would be. These were classified using the same criteria that were used for parental occupations (see Section 2.1) and compared with parental jobs.