

## MORE ON SCHOOL DROPOUT - TWO NEW REPORTS

November 1994 saw the publication of two studies\* relevant to the subject of early school leaving.

An interesting point about Scott Boldt's study, Listening and Learning, is the very different perceptions of the causes of early school leaving depending on who one talks to. For instance although community members and principals emphasised peer pressure as an important factor, neither the early school leavers, nor their parents, nor their teachers, thought it was of much significance.

Boldt found that school personnel and community members tend to blame the parents when a pupil drops out of school, because they are seen to place little value on schooling and not encourage and prepare their children adequately. Parents accept some of the blame, but consider other factors to be more important, such as unsuitable subjects, or lack of respect by teachers for children. The early school leavers themselves do not attach much importance to home factors. Most parents expressed the view that when their children reach the age of fifteen, there is little they can do if their children have their minds set on something. On the other hand, many of the children who stayed on at school gave the main reason as the insistence or encouragement of their parents. Thus the influence of parents on children seems to work most through encouraging/not encouraging them to stay rather than actively encouraging them to leave.

There was broad consensus that there are differences in values and expectations between the people of the inner city and those who work in the schools. Most mothers interviewed said that they and their children do not consider the future and do not plan ahead. Opportunities for work, or to participate in courses in which one is paid, play a major part in the decision to quit school.

Difficulties at home, sometimes due to unemployment or financial problems, undoubtedly affect children's behaviour at school. These difficulties, say principals, are 'played out' by pupils in school through misbehaviour and indiscipline.

One of the most interesting and disturbing findings is the extent to which the teacher-pupil relationship was perceived as contributing to the decision to leave school. Almost all the early school leavers 'hated' school and the teachers. Certainly some of the examples given by the children are hard to believe, such as, 'A teacher asked me in front of the whole class if my father was molesting me. It wasn't true, but I almost died of embarrassment and never forgave

that teacher'. Other ex-pupils remember being referred to publicly as 'useless', or 'abnormal', or 'the devil's child'. Some teachers were perceived as too tough and mean, others as too soft and poor on discipline. Ex-pupils spoke of teachers who 'didn't care' and were only concerned with collecting their wages. The children felt they had performed best in subjects taught by teachers they liked and respected, and who respected them. Some community members were of the opinion that because of their background, teachers need more training to work in inner city schools.

A lot of comments were made about the unsuitability and inflexibility of the curriculum. One community member cites the example of children being forced to learn Irish while they had literacy problems in English. Some early school leavers felt it might have made a difference if subjects had been more practical.

The INTO study of ex-pupils of disadvantaged schools shows that only 25% of children from disadvantaged schools sat the Leaving Certificate (compared with 78% for the general population). More than 6% did not attend post primary school at all. Information about some of the ex-pupils could not be obtained in the survey, but ten years after leaving school about 36% of them were definitely in full-time employment in Ireland, and the same percentage were definitely unemployed.

According to the study, measures needed to reduce the gap between disadvantaged children and those better off would include:

- a further 600 schools to be categorised as disadvantaged;

For all disadvantaged schools:

- a maximum class size of 25;
- the upgrading of these schools and their environment;
- increased capitation grants;
- additional concessionary posts;
- free textbooks and materials;
- a specific budget for equipment and computers.

Other suggestions relate to the involvement of parents, pre-school education, teacher training, and psychological services.

*\*Listening and Learning, by Scott Boldt, is a study of early school leavers from Dublin's inner city, published by the Marino Institute of Education. Where Are They Now?, is a follow-up study on pupils who left urban and rural primary schools designated as disadvantaged in June 1982. It is published by the Irish National Teacher's Organisation.*

