Post-School Transitions of Young People with Low Levels of Achievement in Ireland

Emer Smyth

Selina McCoy

Merike Darmody

Introduction

- Large body of research on social differentiation in post-school transitions

- But less attention to the role of the school (with some exceptions)

- The *Leaving School in Ireland* study provides new insights into the way in which school processes shape longer-term outcomes

The Leaving School in Ireland study

- Mixed methods study:
  - Cohort of young people from Post-Primary Longitudinal Study, around 900 students from 12 case-study schools who were followed from first year to final year of secondary education
  - Survey (2011), 3-4 years post-school, of those who left with a Leaving Certificate (upper secondary qualification)
  - In-depth qualitative interviews with a sub-group

Irish educational system

- Three year junior cycle (lower secondary):
  - 'Core': Irish, English and Maths
  - Choice of subjects – role of school
  - Higher and lower levels in subjects (foundation level in Irish, English and Maths)
  - Standardised exam
- Two year senior cycle (upper secondary):
  - Largely 'general'
  - Differentiation in subject levels and choice
  - Standardised exam
  - Leaving Certificate Applied programme (pre-vocational)

Irish educational system

- Higher education now the dominant post-school pathway

- Lower relative status of further education (Post Leaving Certificate courses and apprenticeships)

- Centralised applications process (CAO)

- Covers university and institute of technology courses; degree and sub-degree courses

- 'Points' awarded based on subject level taken and grades received in upper secondary exam

- Numerus clausus – required points depend on popularity of course and grade profile of applicants

Education and the labour market in Ireland

- Grades matter for entry to post-school education and training

- But they are also used as a signal by employers

- Grades have been found to be more important during recessionary periods

Research questions

1. What influences young people's achievement levels?

2. What impact do these achievement levels have on their post-school pathways?

Influences on achievement

- Gender, social class and having a special educational need

- Reading and Maths test scores on entry to secondary education

- Lower secondary experiences:
  - Ability grouping
  - Negative interaction with teachers and levels of misbehaviour
  - Educational aspirations

Ability grouping

- Streaming is more commonly used in schools serving a disadvantaged population

- Working-class students are more likely to be in streamed classes, esp. lower streams

- Greater disengagement and lower educational aspirations found among lower stream groups:

  We don't do our homework so we don't get it. Teachers know we don't do it so they don't bother checking it.
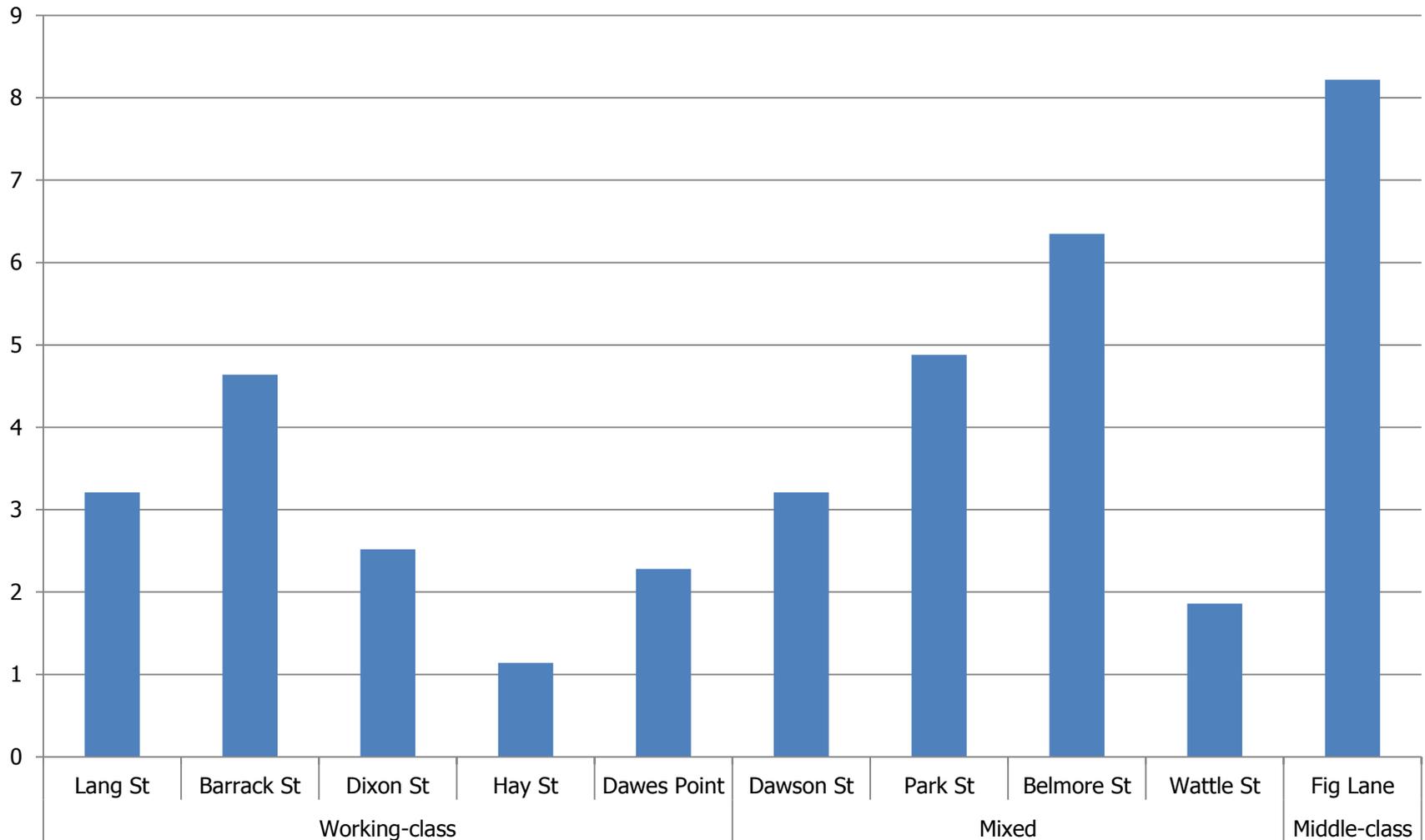
  We don't get homework.

  We never did get homework.

  We're sort of the thick class. (Lower/middle streams, working-class school)
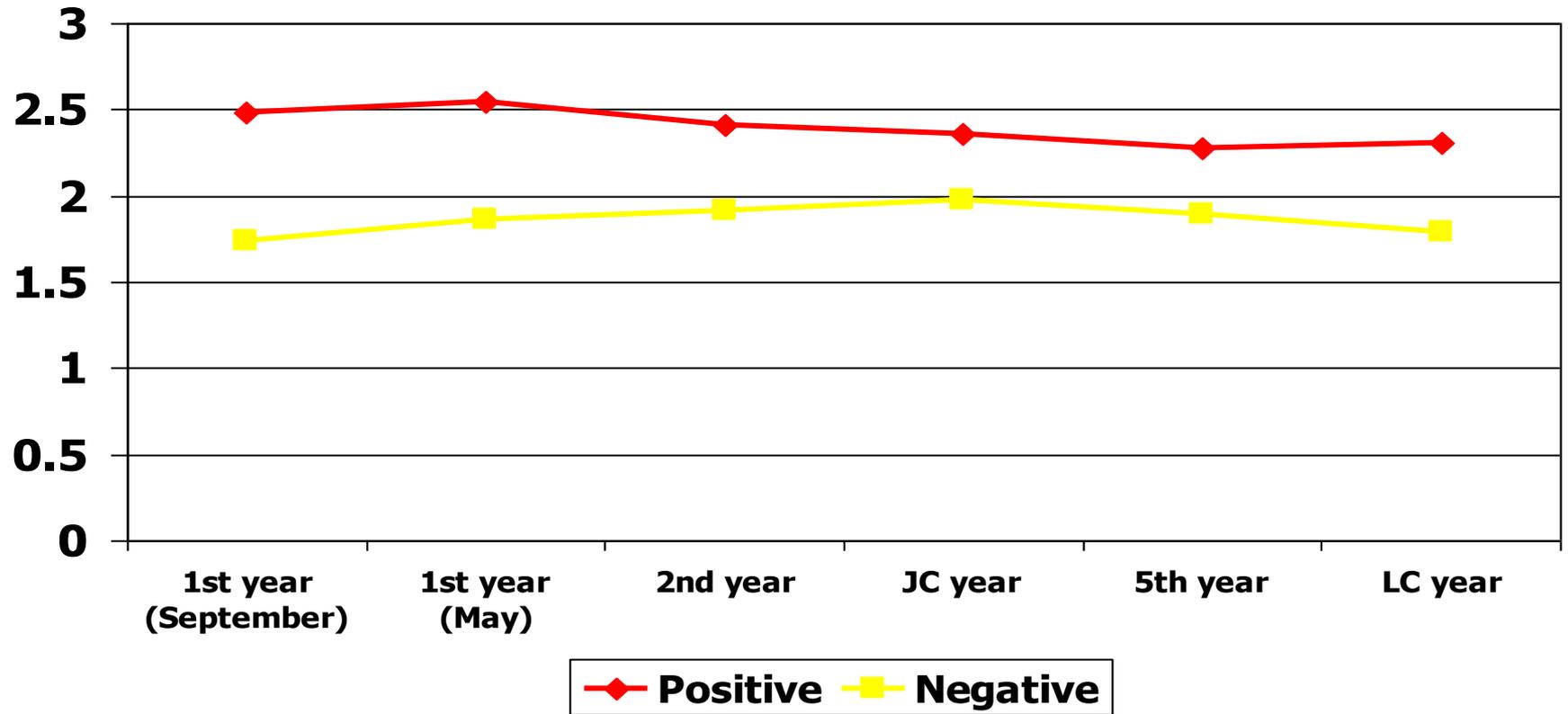
Impact of streaming (net of prior achievement)

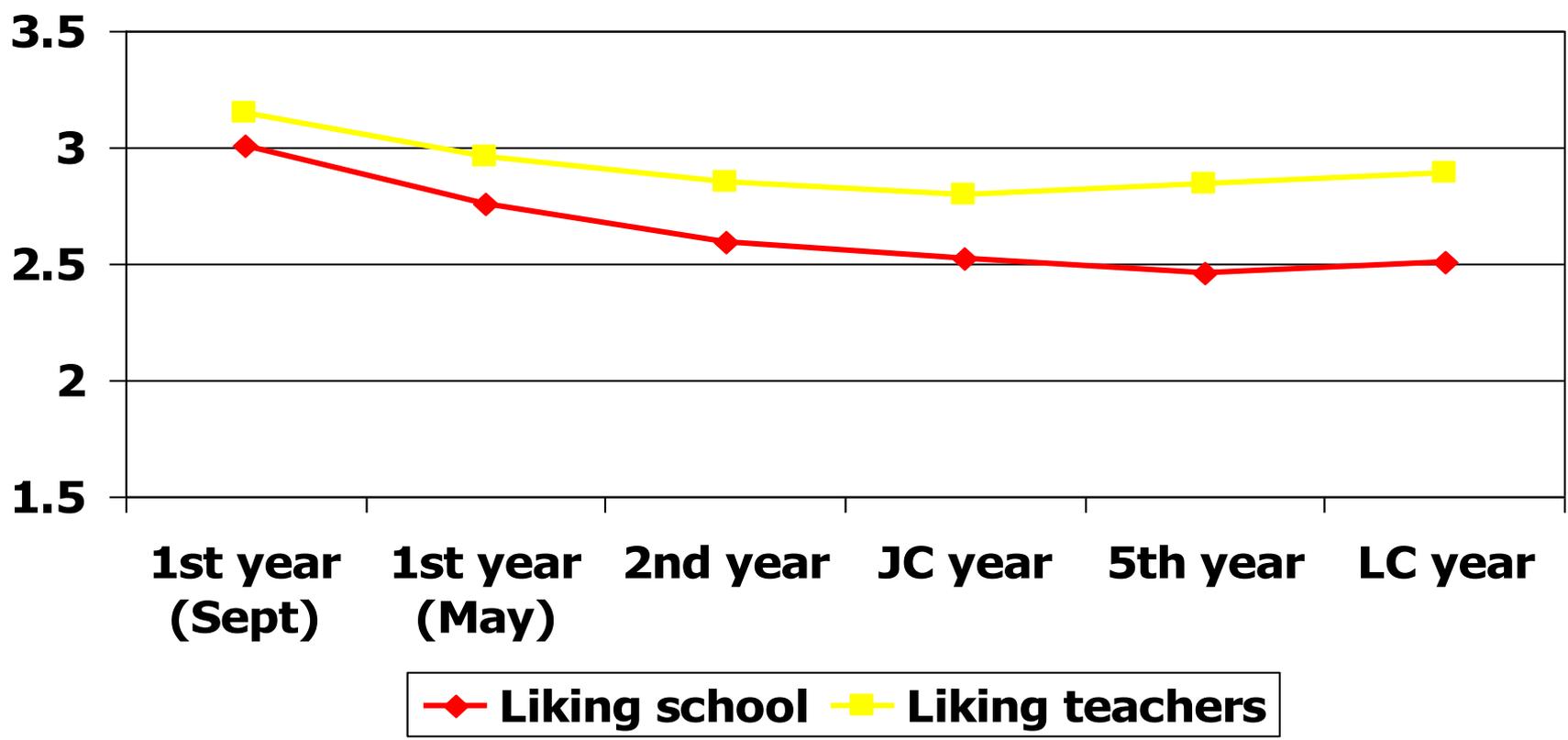Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study

Differential access to higher level subjects across schools (controlling for ability)

Changes in student-teacher relations

Liking school and teachers

School climate and student engagement

- Change in nature of interaction with teachers as students move through the schooling system
- Negative interaction increases more in working-class schools and in lower streamed classes

School drives you mad, it actually would, the teachers, if you'd better teachers there would be no one getting in trouble.

When you come back at the start of the year you're alright for a while.

You calm down but then it starts building up through the year because you're so bored of school and you want to get out of it. (Middle stream, working-class boys' school)

Impact of school climate

- School completion: negative relations with teachers a dominant theme in early leaver accounts

  I hit third year and I just started not getting on with the teachers and all. I kept getting thrown out of classes and suspended all and I just hated it and I hate that school. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

  The teachers say stuff to you like, you know kind of put you down … so then you feel like oh I haven't got the teacher on my side, they don't want to teach me so like, is there any point being here at all. (Eric, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)
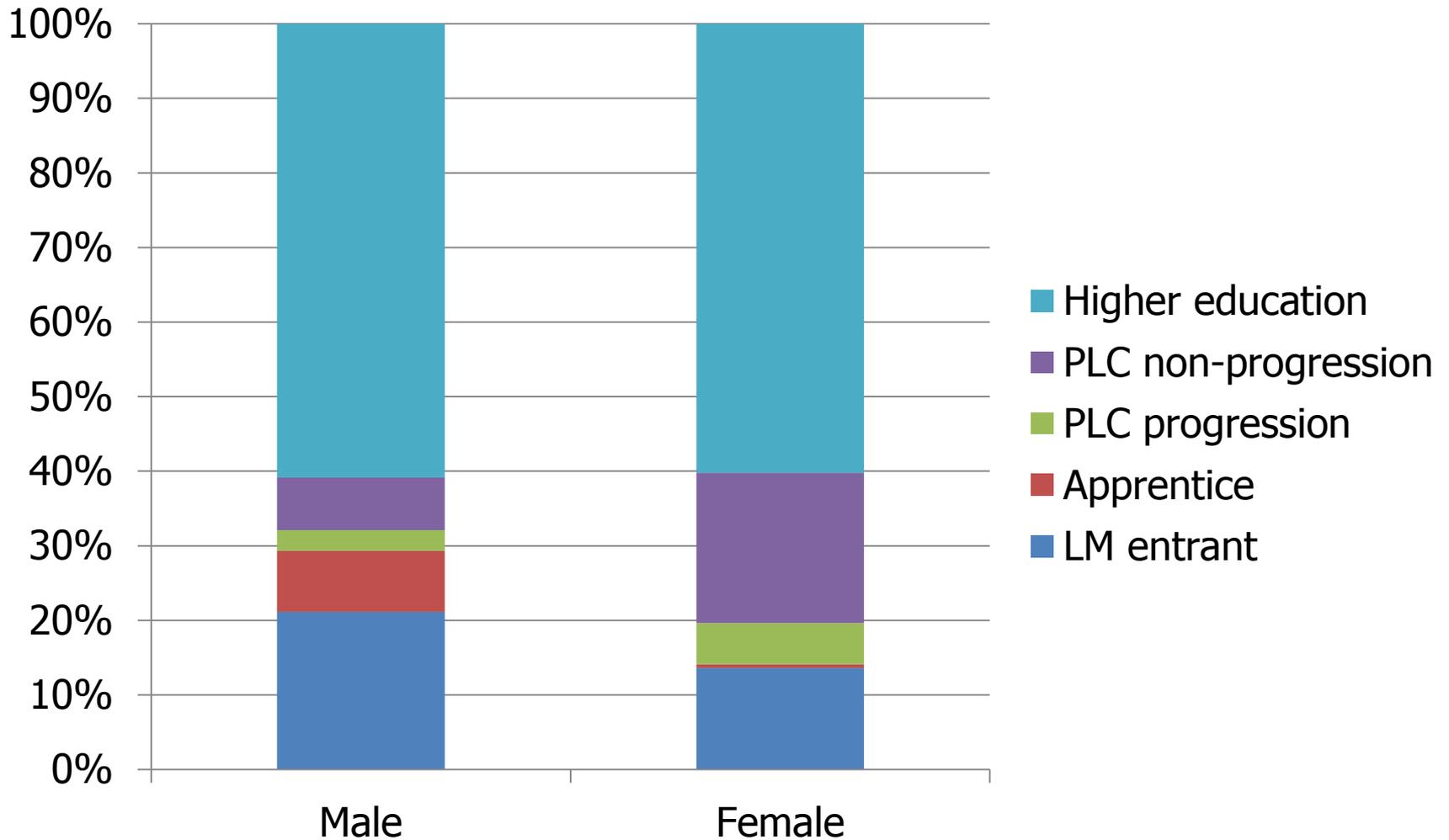
- Educational achievement: negative interaction and underperformance

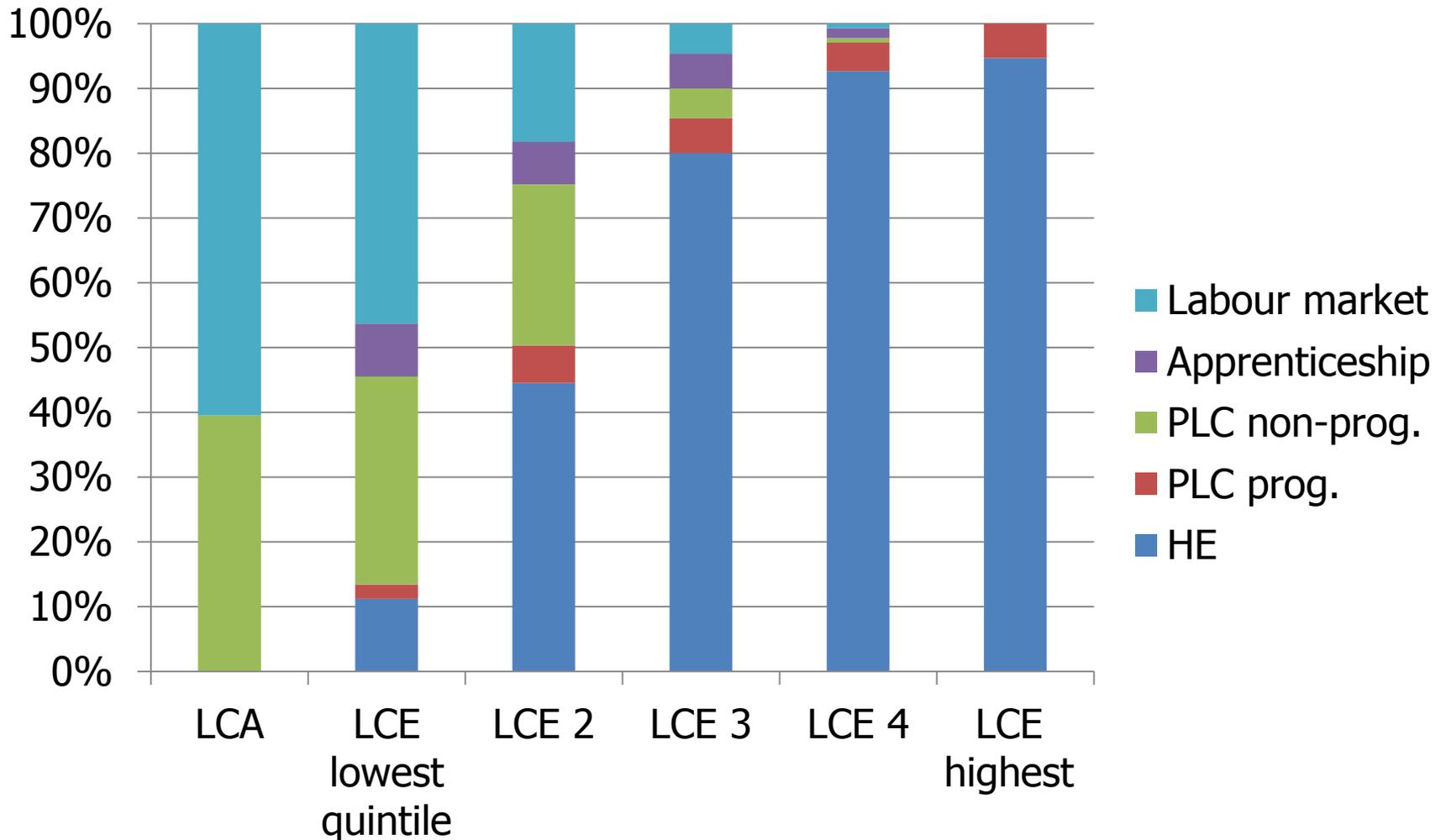# Upper secondary influences on achievement

- Lower grades in Junior Certificate (lower secondary) exam
- Upper secondary experiences:
  - Time spent on homework and study
  - Involvement in part-time work and social life
  - More higher level subjects
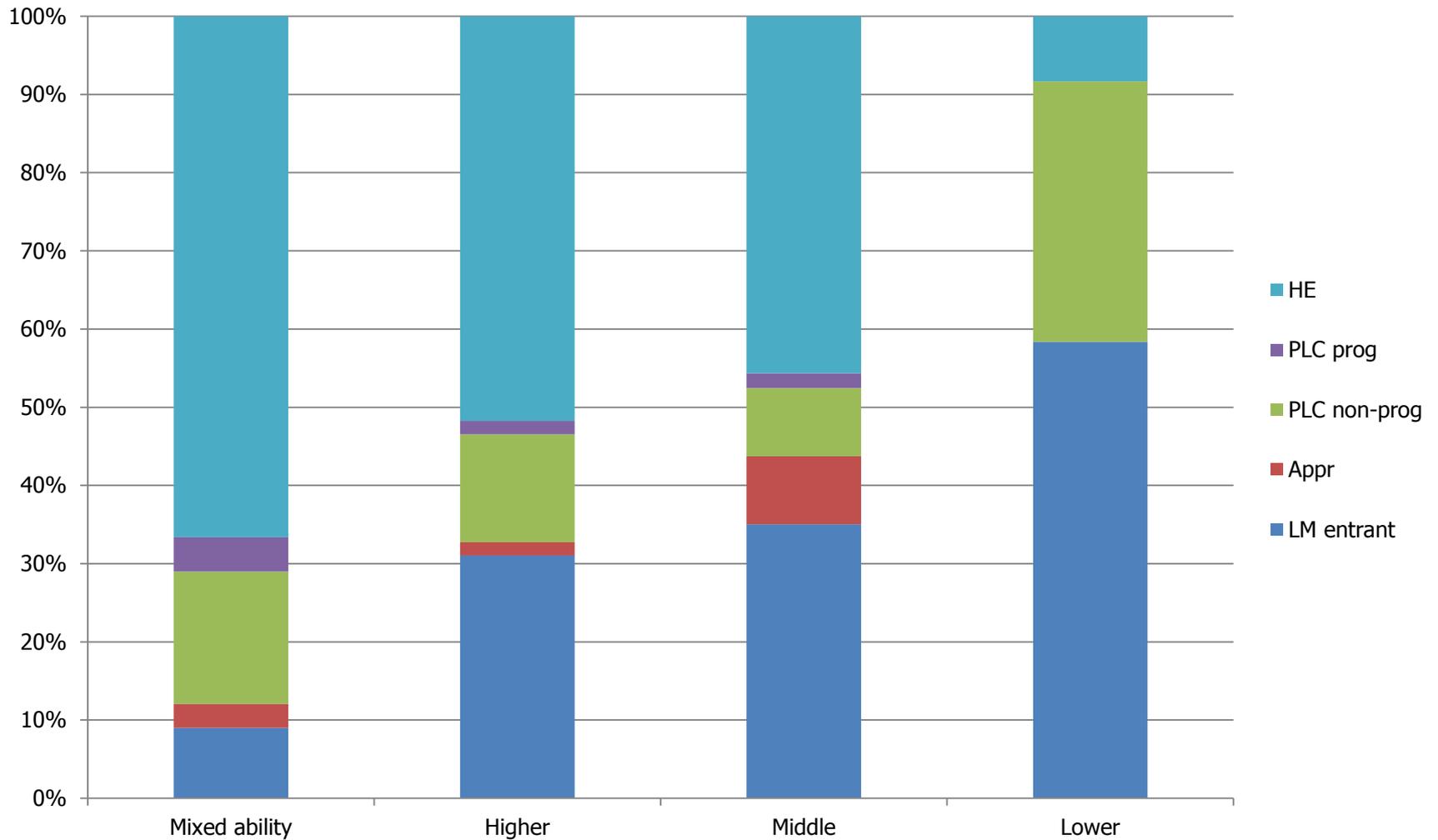- Significant between-school variation in grades
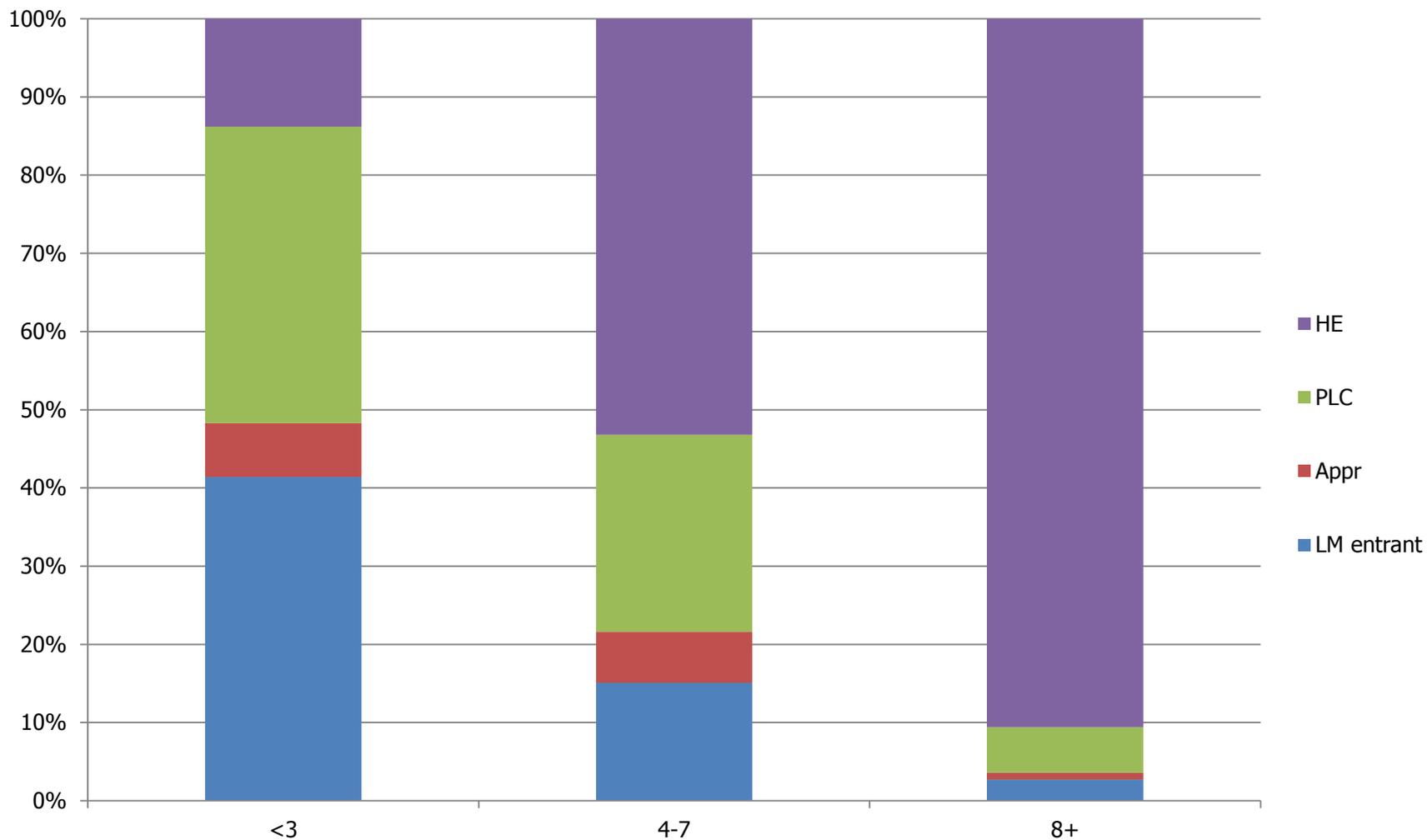
Post-school pathways
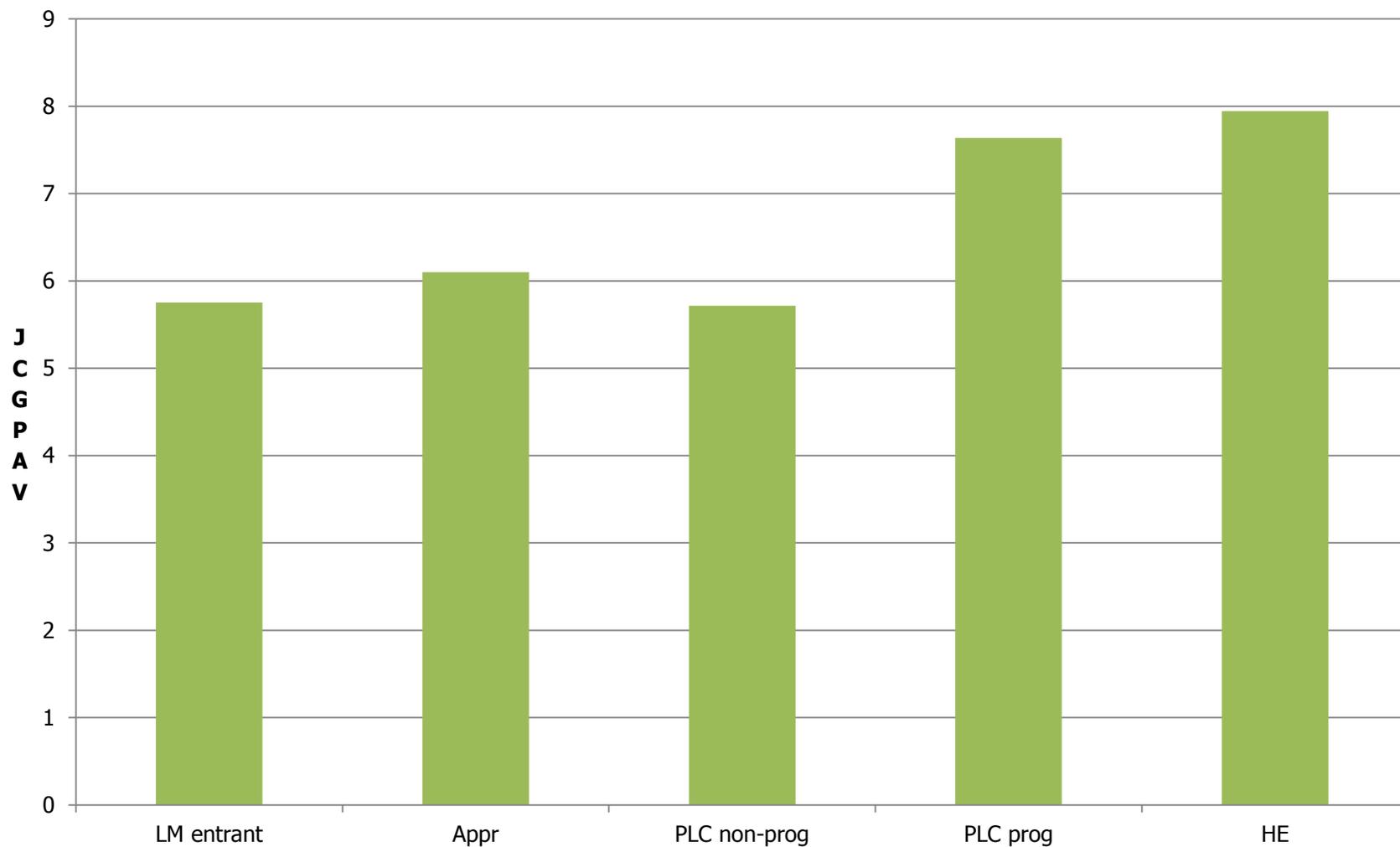
Pathways and educational achievement

Pathways and ability grouping
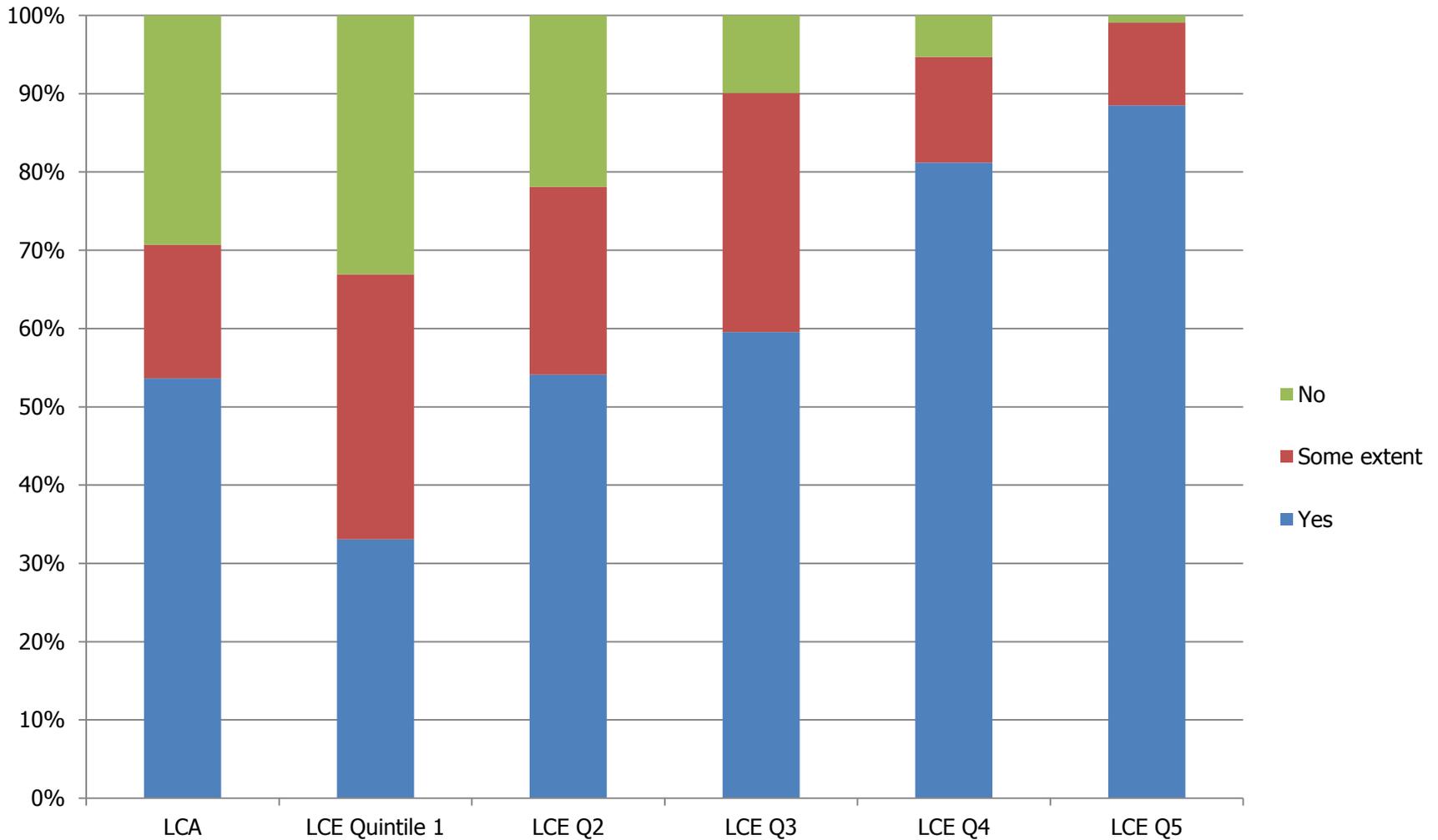
Pathways and higher level subjects

Pathways and lower secondary grades

Schools make a difference

- Through educational achievement (above) but also through other factors

- Impact of positive attitudes to school on later educational participation

- Influence of negative relations with teachers

- Significant impact of social mix of the school:

  - Higher education as 'taken for granted' in middle-class schools
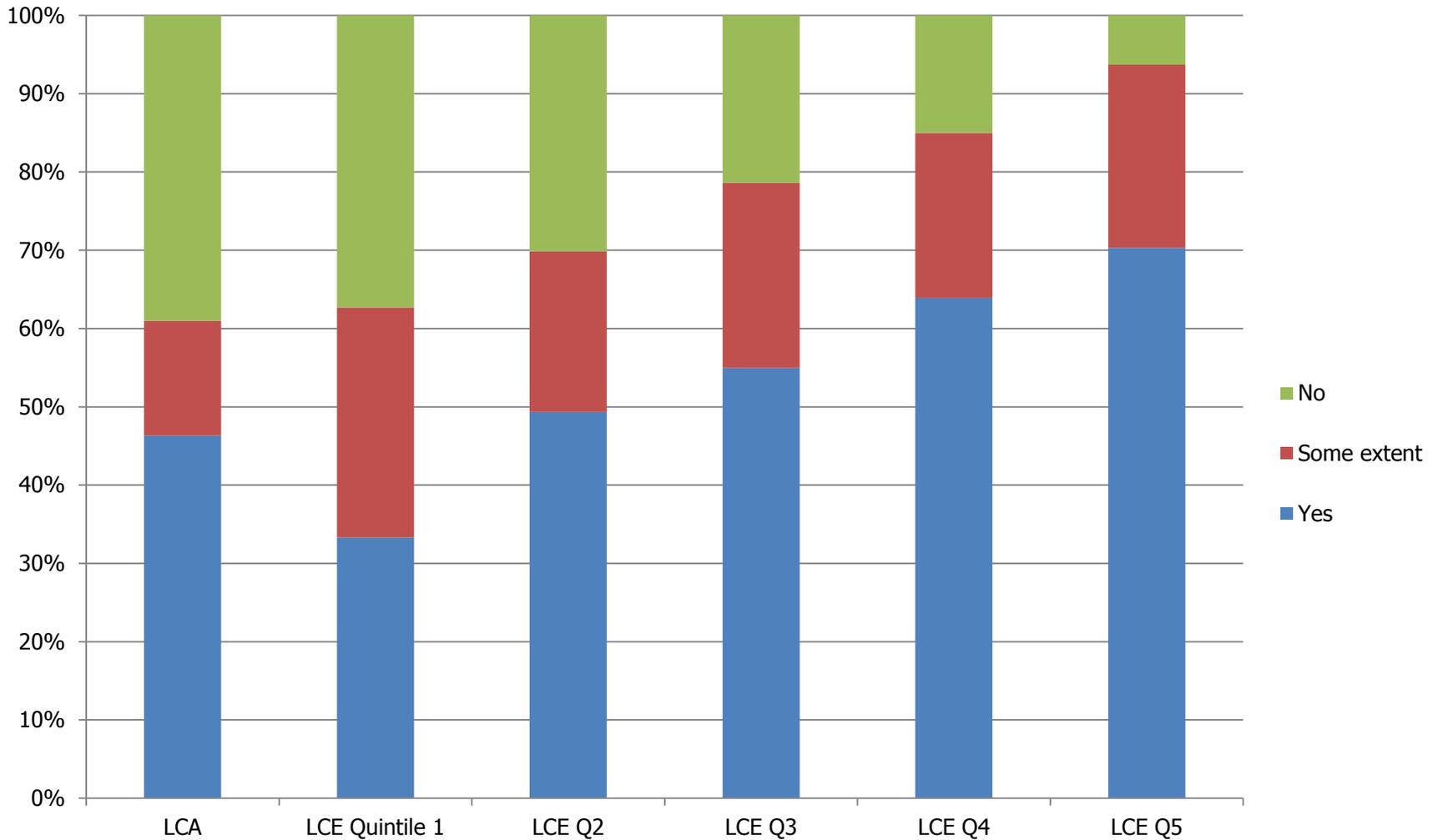
  - Lower expectations in working-class schools

Realising goals

Regretting choices

- Only 53% would choose the same pathway again
- This reflects:
  - Not accessing their preferred course
  - Finding it difficult to find a job in the recession
  - Courses not being what they expected
- Related to satisfaction with career guidance
- More prevalent for those with lower LC grades and those from working-class backgrounds

Choose same pathway by achievement

Conclusions

- Educational achievement levels have very significant consequences for post-school pathways

- Compromise and regret among lower-achieving young people

- Early educational success emerges as crucial in channelling young people to post-school education, especially HE