

In Australia today young people face very unequal life chances. What is the impact of different family situations on young people as they complete secondary school? What are the implications of their engagement with school? What can schools do to promote opportunities for all students?

Young people face many challenges in their transitions from school to further education and to employment. Their engagement with school can play an important role in how they meet these challenges and their lack of engagement is seen as a cause of early school leaving. While education is critical to gaining employment, not all young people benefit from an adequate, let alone 'good', education. It is important that we know which young people miss out, why, and what becomes of them in order to inform appropriate policy and service responses.

Stages 7 and 8 of the Brotherhood of St Laurence's longitudinal Life Chances Study have explored school engagement for a group of young people growing up in Australia today.

The study

The study commenced with 167 children born in inner Melbourne in 1990 and has followed their lives since. The Life Chances Study has aimed to explore over time their life opportunities and outcomes, to compare the lives of those in families on low incomes with those in more affluent circumstances and to inform government and community interventions to improve the lives of Australian children, particularly those in disadvantaged circumstances.

At stage 7 of the study, we interviewed 41 of the young people (at age 15) and their parents. We selected all those who had grown up in families on persistently low incomes (33) and, for comparison, a group of eight who had grown up in high-income families. Stage 8 involved most of the families remaining in the study: 125 young people at age 16 (75 girls and 50 boys) and their parents completed short surveys. At this stage 25% of the families were still living in the inner suburbs, while most had moved elsewhere in Melbourne, and a few to other towns, interstate or overseas.

Given Australia's recent economic prosperity, both the changes and the lack of change in family incomes are significant. The proportion of low-income families in the study has remained fairly constant since 1990; however there has been a decrease in medium-income families and an increase in high-income families. At 16 years of age, 31% of the study participants were living in low-income families, 25% in medium-income families and 44% in higher income families. While some families' low incomes had increased over the years, 73% of the young people whose families had been on low income when they were infants were still in families with low incomes at age 16. This highlights that financial constraint is a long-term phenomenon for these young people, even in quite prosperous times. The low-income families included a high proportion of sole parents, parents with few educational qualifications, non-English speaking and unemployed parents and large families—characteristics which, especially in combination, made it difficult for them to increase their family income.

School engagement and life chances at 15 & 16

Janet Taylor
& Lucy Nelms



This summary presents some of the findings from the latest reports from the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Life Chances Study: *School engagement and life chances and Life chances at 16*



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School engagement

School engagement is discussed in our reports as an important issue to consider separately from school achievement. The concept of school engagement involves issues such as participation in school activities and a sense of belonging to school. It is seen as having behavioural, emotional and cognitive aspects. The research literature shows school engagement to be influenced by both family background and school factors.

Stage 7: 15 year olds in low-income families (33 young people)

The importance of school

In spite of having parents with limited education, at 15 the young people in low-income families typically named education as one of the most important things in their current life—alongside their family and their friends.

It means a lot to me, education—because it's all about the future. Good education, good future.

They all said their parents saw school as important. For example:

They think school is very important to me considering that they didn't finish high school. Yeah because of the [Vietnam] war or something. And they really want me to do really well in school so I can go to uni and get a really good job and have money because they don't want me to be like them.

Influences on school engagement

These young people's positive engagement with school was influenced by school factors such as feeling they were doing well academically, having teachers they could talk to, having school friends and participating in school sport and other activities. On the other hand, problems included feeling they did not understand the work, bullying and feeling left out. Some low-income young people missed out on school activities such as camps because they were too expensive. This could in turn affect their academic work as well as their sense of belonging at school. As one boy explained:

Like after you go on camp you've got to do an assessment task on it, and you don't know because you didn't go to the camp. So sometimes you get a really bad mark. (Do they give you a separate assessment?) Sometimes, but mostly they don't.

One sole parent explained:

Because of the finance problem I can't get a tutor for her ... I can only afford a normal computer for her to do homework, no internet. She envies her friends who have beautiful fashion clothes, order yummy lunches and can travel overseas every year.

One capable student was quite explicit about the way one difficulty led to another at school, illustrating what could be called a cycle of disengagement:

I didn't enjoy school at all [Year 10]. It was just that the classes weren't challenging enough for me and I tended to get real bored and I started to challenge teachers and they didn't like that, so they wouldn't help me. They got angry and I just started wagging school and got into trouble for that.

Family influences that the young people discussed included impacts of parental separation and family conflict, the pros and cons of their parents' employment and the problems of low family income. Many felt their parents were supportive of their education and future planning, although a small number felt their parents' expectations were too high.

What would help?

The young people's suggestions about what would improve school for them included teachers having better control of classes, more assistance for students who were having difficulties and help in planning their futures. They emphasised the importance of teachers who would listen to them. One disengaged young person commented:

Listen! That's what they have to do the most and they don't. They're too focused on the bad kids and trying to get the kids in line and make sure they wear their bloody uniform. They don't ask them why they're not wearing their uniform, like they're kicked out of the house. They just go 'Here's an exemption note for today and if you do it again you get suspension'.

Stage 8: 16 year olds (125 young people)

The great majority (96%) of the 125 young people in stage 8 of the study were still at school at the end of year they turned 16. Most were in Year 10, some in Year 11. Overall the 16 year olds were less engaged with school than they had been as 11 and 12 year olds (see Table 1). For example, they were less likely to report that they looked forward to school, got on well with their teachers or did their homework on time.

Table 1 School engagement factors by age (n=125)

	age 11/12	age 16
	%	%
I always or often ...		
Have a good group of friends at school	86	83
Enjoy learning new things	NA	58
Get on well with my teachers*	69	55
Do my homework on time*	69	46
Look forward to going to school	48	37
Feel left out at school	2	4
Wag school	NA	2
Fight with other kids	2	2

Notes: NA = not applicable. These questions were not asked at age 11 & 12.

*P<0.05 using McNemar test of significance.

High engagement with school was associated with high self-rated school achievement, with positive family relationships and with high family income. For example, while 42% of 16 year olds in high-income families

had a high engagement score, only 18% of those in low-income families did so (and 19% of those in medium-income families). Conversely low school engagement was associated with low self-rated school achievement, negative family relationships and risk behaviours such as drinking and trouble with the police.

Early school leavers

The five 16 year olds who had already left school had all had low engagement with school before they left, most but not all were from low-income families and most but not all had had learning difficulties. While some had tried to engage in further study or work since leaving school, none was employed or studying at the time of the survey.

Future plans

Completing Year 12 has become the norm for young Australians, with the retention rate to Year 12 in 2006 being 75%. In this study most of the 16 year olds (92%) were planning to finish Year 12 and most of these to go on to

further study (see Table 2). Some were unsure about future training and some mentioned a number of options: 70% mentioned plans to go to university, 18% to TAFE, 16% an apprenticeship and 6% planned to work but not study.

Planning to go on to university for these 16 years olds was associated with high family income, parents having tertiary education, high self-rated school achievement, school engagement, being in a two parent family, being a girl, a sense of wellbeing and low risk behaviour. In contrast those planning TAFE or apprenticeships were likely to have low school engagement and low self-rated school achievement. Of the low-income 16 year olds, 84% were planning to finish Year 12 and 54% had plans to go to university. However some 23% of young people from low-income families worried that costs of university or further training would be a problem for them.

Even among the young people who rated their school achievement as low, 40% reported that they planned to go to university.

Table 2 Plans for school completion and post-school plans by family income at age 16

	Low income (n=39)	Medium income (n=31)	High income (n=55)	Total (n=125)
	%	%	%	%
Plan to complete Year 12	84	90	100	92
Post-school plans				
University*	54	61	87	70
TAFE*	21	42	4	18
Apprenticeship	31	16	6	16
Work only	5	7	6	6

*p<0.05 Note: post-school plans had multiple responses so percentages do not

Implications for policy and practice

Young people's positive engagement with school—enjoying school academically and socially, feeling a sense of belonging and being able to participate fully in school activities—is important for their current well-being, their future completion of school, their further education and employment.

Which 16 year olds are missing out on education and why? The study confirms both the continuity and layering of disadvantage, but also the diversity of experiences and outcomes within different socioeconomic groups. The 16 year olds from low-income families with parents that have limited education are more likely than their more affluent peers to leave school early and less likely to be planning university careers. This difference raises the question of how, as a society, we can provide educational opportunities for the young people whose parents are less affluent, to compensate for what the parents cannot provide.

While school engagement is influenced to some extent by the young people's family background, the research literature and this study confirm that there are important ways in which

schools and education policy makers can work to increase the engagement of disadvantaged young people with school.

The following issues seem particularly relevant for each school:

- a climate of inclusion, for young people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, and those with different academic abilities
- dealing with costs of activities, equipment and fees so as not to exclude students on low incomes
- dealing with absenteeism to avoid a harmful cycle leading to more absenteeism
- listening to students and engaging with them as young adults.

Policy issues of particular relevance for young people such as those in our study include:

- providing *affordable* post-compulsory education—including school, TAFE and university
- providing non-academic career options, flexible pathways and ways back into education and training for those who have left.

The study calls for greater investment in the education and support of students who are struggling academically and/or those with challenging behaviour. Such investment in these young people before they leave school is likely not only to improve their individual life chances but also to benefit their peers at school.

Federal and state governments, and some individual schools have developed a number of transition programs

for students at risk. Nonetheless the findings suggest that schools need to be better resourced:

- to provide teaching supports and approaches to more effectively meet the needs of students who are struggling with learning difficulties
- to improve pathways to vocational training
- to identify and support students likely to be early school leavers.

At the wider policy level the study illustrates the importance of adequate income support for families with teenage children and for the young people who have left home.

Life Chances Study reports

School engagement and life chances (Taylor & Nelms 2006) and *Life chances at 16* (Taylor & Nelms 2008) are available on the Brotherhood of St Laurence website <www.bsl.org.au> Earlier reports from the Life Chances Study can be purchased from the Brotherhood of St Laurence, 67 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy 3065 (email publications@bsl.org.au or phone 03 9483 1386).

For further information about the study contact Janet Taylor, Research Coordinator, (phone 03 9483 1376 or email jtaylor@bsl.org.au) or visit the website <www.bsl.org.au>.

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