



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

School engagement and life chances

15 year olds in transition

Life Chances Study stage 7

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Summary

Young people in Australia face many challenges in their transitions from school to further education and to employment. School is a predominant aspect of their daily lives and also a key influence on their futures. Their engagement with school can play an important role in how they meet these challenges. Conversely lack of engagement with school is seen as a cause of early school leaving. The research literature shows school engagement to be influenced by both family background and school factors. Stage 7 of the Brotherhood of St Laurence's longitudinal Life Chances Study explored school engagement and transitions as particular issues for young people growing up in Australia today.

The Life Chances Study

The Life Chances Study is a longitudinal study of children born in 1990 in inner Melbourne. The study commenced with 167 children and has followed them and their families over the years as many moved away from the inner suburbs. The families are very diverse, including high and low-income families and a range of ethnic groups.

At stage 7 of the study, we followed up 41 of the young people at 15, the age of the end of compulsory schooling in Victoria. We selected all those who had grown up in families on low incomes (33) and, for comparison, a group of eight who had grown up in high-income families. The data included an interview with the young people, the self-completion About Myself survey and an interview with the parents. The low-income families included a high proportion of sole parent families, 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

Most of the 15 year olds were in Year 9, with some in Year 10, one in Year 8 and two at special schools. Two young people, a boy and a girl, had already left school, one of whom was working part time. Both were from low-income families. Fourteen of those at school already had part-time jobs and others were looking for them.

The young people in low-income families typically named education as one of the most important things in their life at present, alongside their family and their friends. They all said their parents saw school as important (including parents who had had little formal education themselves). Most intended to complete Year 12, although a few wanted to leave earlier, for example to go to TAFE. Not all felt their friends saw school as important.

How engaged were they with school? A school engagement score took into account items such as looking forward to going to school, getting on with teachers, enjoying learning, having friends, absenteeism and feeling left out. As a group, the 15 year olds were less engaged with school than when they were aged 11 and 12; and those from low-income families were less engaged than those from high-income families.

Case studies illustrate aspects of the young people's lives at home and at school which interact to influence their engagement or disengagement with school. One capable student was quite explicit about the way one difficulty fed into 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.

Influences of school and family factors

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 friends and participating in school sport and other activities. 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.

Family factors 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 some felt their parents' expectations for their education were too high.

The 15 year olds' suggestions about what would improve school for them included teachers having better control, more assistance for students who were having difficulties and assistance in planning their futures. They emphasised the importance of teachers who would listen to them.

Implications

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 likely to be important for their current well-being and also for their future completion of school, their further education and employment.

While school engagement is influenced 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 (wagging) to avoid a harmful cycle leading to more absenteeism
- listening to students and engaging with them as young adults.

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.

Policy issues of particular relevance for 15 years olds such as those in our study include:

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

The 15 year olds' experiences and the wider literature on school engagement highlight the importance of promoting school engagement and preventing exclusion from school and from further educational opportunities. This involves both promoting a school climate of inclusion and avoiding cycles of disengagement.

Introduction

This report draws on stage 7 of the Brotherhood of St Laurence's longitudinal Life Chances Study to explore school engagement and transition for young people growing up in Australia today. It reports on interviews with 41 selected 15 year olds and their parents who have been part of the study since the children's infancy. Most of these young people have grown up in families on low incomes, some in higher income families. The report outlines some recent large-scale research on school engagement and related literature and then explores the experiences of these young people who have reached the age of the end of compulsory schooling. Their views are presented in relation to school engagement, transition to work and the other factors they see influencing their lives. We are concerned particularly with factors that lead to the social exclusion of young people. The report concludes by discussing some of the implications of the findings for schools and wider policy.

The wider context

Young people in Australia are of course growing up in an ever-changing world. Globalisation has an impact on their life chances and lifestyles. Changes in family structure mean increasing numbers do not live in the traditional two-parent household. Changes in employment mean many young people are growing up with two parents in employment and many with no parent in employment. Their parents' employment is increasingly likely to be precarious or insecure, contract and/or casual, rather than full-time and permanent, as is the employment that will be available to them.

The effects of inequality are marginalising some young people. In a consumer society, both the reality and the perception of the gap between the rich and the poor have impacts. There is also geographic inequality, both between rural and urban settings and within cities. One aspect is the concentration of disadvantage in particular areas associated with public housing policies.

White and Wyn (2004) point to two aspects of changes that are important for understanding young people's experience of education in Australia: workplace restructuring and privatisation of education. There is an emphasis on the knowledge society and the need for a good education to get a good job, while at the same time the major area of employment growth is low-paid jobs in service industries. Meanwhile the cost of tertiary education to the individual is rising, as public spending on higher education has been reduced by 12 per cent 1995–99 (OECD 2002 in White & Wyn 2004, p.126). Australia has one of the lowest proportions of government funding for tertiary education in the OECD (OECD 2006).

While increased levels of education are associated with increased income and higher level jobs, the links can be obscure for young people (White & Wyn 2004). Simply dividing young people into mainstream students and 'at risk' non-students can ignore the uncertainty faced by all young people (Dwyer & Wyn 2001).

In 2004 some 80 per cent of young people completed secondary school or equivalent (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2005). Boundaries between school and TAFE have blurred in recent years as schools offer more vocationally oriented courses. In 2004 nearly 50 per cent of students in Years 11 and 12 were enrolled in a VET in Schools program (Vocational Education and Training) (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2005). School-based apprenticeships and traineeships are recent innovations that provide alternative ways of studying while keeping students at school to complete Year 12.

Engagement with school

School is central to the daily lives of many young people. Students' engagement with school can be an important aspect of their current lives and also an influence on their futures. Lack of engagement with school is seen as a cause of early school leaving and reduces the likelihood of going on to further education. The concept of engagement with school is a focus for this study.

Much research on school effectiveness has focused on academic outcomes, rather than on how schools engage their students. Fullarton (2002) argues schools need to address both formal knowledge and the students' wider developmental needs. Willms (2003) considers school engagement in terms of a sense of belonging and participation as important school outcomes in their own right that should be seen alongside academic achievement. The Victorian Office of School Education also spells out student engagement and well-being, as one of the three central categories of student outcomes, along with student learning and pathways and transitions (Department of Education and Training 2005).

Engagement can be defined in a number of ways and indicators have differed in different studies. Components of engagement include (Fredricks et al. 2004):

- behavioural – participation in school ranging from involvement in school-based extra-curricular activities (Fullarton 2002) to attendance at or absenteeism from school (Willms 2003), also involvement in learning and academic tasks (Fredricks et al. 2004)
- emotional – sense of belonging (Willms 2003) and value
- cognitive – a belief that school is 'for me' (Munns 2005), an engagement and investment in learning and the school community.

Two major recent large-scale studies of school engagement are outlined below (Fullarton 2002; Willms 2003) are outlined below, together with a key review of the concept (Fredricks et al. 2004). These provide important background for the present study.

Participation in extracurricular activities

Fullarton (2002) studied school engagement of Year 10 students (1999) as part of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY). She defined engagement in terms of participation in extracurricular activities (sport, music, debating, drama and community work) organised by the school. She found higher levels of engagement for individual students were associated with student factors (being female, being generally happy with school and learning, planning tertiary study and when students believed their school had a good school climate), family background (higher socioeconomic backgrounds) and school factors (single sex schools and non-government schools).

Analysing LSAY data with a focus on educational attitudes and intentions, Khoo and Ainley (2005) found engagement with school and positive attitudes to school (as well as mastery of literacy and numeracy) contribute to completion of secondary school and participation in post-school education and training. However the research indicated complex links between engagement and other factors in their influence on students' intentions to complete school or enter higher education.

Attendance and belonging

A major international study of student engagement of 15 year olds across some 43 countries, including Australia, used the nationally representative data from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Willms 2003). Willms examined two dimensions of engagement: participation (measured by attendance and absenteeism) and a sense of belonging. Across the OECD, almost one-quarter of students had a low sense of belonging and 20 per cent had low participation. There were interesting variations between countries, with Australia very close to the OECD average on both measures. In nearly every country the prevalence of disaffected students varied significantly among schools.

The PISA findings challenge the popular notion that student disaffection and poor literacy necessarily go hand in hand. A sense of belonging and participation were not strongly correlated for individual students and sense of belonging was only weakly correlated with academic achievement. Cluster analysis of engagement and literacy gave the following pattern for Australia, which was fairly similar to OECD norm (Willms 2003, p.72):

- top students (26%) (varying levels of engagement and very strong literacy skills)
- engaged students (17%) (highly engaged and varying levels of literacy)
- isolated students (30%) (low sense of belonging and average literacy, including high and low)
- absentee students (11%) (regularly absent from school but average levels of literacy)
- non-academic students (16%) (average levels of engagement but low literacy).

The three major risk factors for a low sense of belonging across the OECD countries were low socio-economic background, foreign birthplace and living in a sole parent family. In the Australian sample, the odds of having a low sense of belonging were 23 per cent greater for students in low socio-economic status families than for those in average socio-economic status families; 20 per cent greater for those in single parent families than in two parent families; and 14 per cent greater for those foreign-born (Willms 2003, p.76). The odds of low participation rates were 27 per cent greater for those in low socio-economic status families and 55 per cent greater for those in sole parent families, with little difference for foreign-born.

Other findings from the OECD countries overall included: schools had higher levels of student engagement where there was a strong disciplinary climate, good student–teacher relations and high expectations of student success.

Willms (2003) argues that low student engagement in secondary school is not simply the consequence of family-related risk factors such as poverty, low parental education or poor cognitive ability. His findings indicate that school-based factors influence engagement and that schools can effect meaningful change to improve engagement.

Scope of the concept of school engagement

Fredericks et al. (2004) undertook a major review of the school engagement literature. They concluded that the potential contribution of the concept to research on student experience has yet to be realised and called for richer characterisations of how students behave, feel and think—research that could aid in the development of finely tuned interventions. Unfortunately the review included neither the PISA nor the LSAY studies, presumably because of their recent publication.

Their review outlines the overlap of the concepts within behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement, with related concepts such as attitudes to school and school motivation, and also the loss of clarity when various measures of engagement are combined into single indices.

From a large number of US studies, Fredericks et al. conclude that behavioural engagement (participation, work behaviour and conduct) is correlated with higher academic achievement. Extracurricular participation is associated with a decrease in the likelihood of dropping out of school for academically at risk students and low-income girls. They report that ethnographic research indicates an emotional connection to teachers and peers can reduce drop-out rates. They note numerous studies have shown a link between teacher support and cognitive engagement. Peers can contribute to either engagement or disengagement with school. The review does not explore the impact of family and community on school engagement, but points to the importance of exploring these factors, and the need to know more about cultural difference in how individuals respond.

The concept of school effectiveness is relevant in considering social engagement. Research on this has focused on leadership, the role of teachers, internal organisation and ethos and has endeavoured to show school effects on student outcomes are large and change can lead to improvements (Teese & Polesel 2003). This contrasts with earlier studies of educational disadvantage which focused solely on external factors (such as neighbourhood and parental education).

Early school leaving

There is a danger in problematising all early school leaving (leaving school before completing Year 12) and it is relevant to remember that early leaving was the norm a generation or so ago. Young people leave school early for a range of reasons. Some actively choose to leave to take up employment, some leave school because they see it as boring or not relevant to them.

In Australia, some 10 per cent of students leave before completing Year 10 and a disproportionate number are identified as low academic achievers, boys, Indigenous or from low socio-economic families (Fullarton 2002). Those who leave before Year 12 have similar characteristics (Penman 2004). LSAY found most early leavers gave work-related reasons as their main reason for leaving. Less than one-third of the 1995 cohort of non-completers said that school-related factors, such as not doing well at school or not liking it, were their main reasons for leaving (Penman 2004, p.25).

In contrast to the LSAY findings, the Early School Leavers project in the early 1990s found that rather than seeing positive options elsewhere, the early school leavers often felt 'anything is better than school' (Dwyer & Wyn 2001, p.47). Their most frequent reasons for leaving school were that they did not like the teachers and found school boring. The pattern for early leavers was one of short-term lowly jobs (when they were available) mixed with living on unemployment benefits and support from family and friends (Holden 1992, cited in Dwyer & Wyn 2001).

Teese and Polesel (2003) in reviewing the increased length of schooling pointed out that economic vulnerability keeps many young people at school but at the price of scholastic vulnerability:

Young people's perceptions of the economic value of completing school are diminished by the experience of failure and by the weak connections between schoolwork and the jobs that are closest to young people. Entering the labour market is often seen as preferable to investing more time in the uncertain benefits of school. (Teese & Polesel 2003, p.133)

They noted that one in five boys in Victoria drop out during Year 10, with girls half as likely to leave. They also found major geographical differences. Frequently nominated reasons for leaving school during Year 10 included: 'couldn't see where school was heading', 'schoolwork didn't interest me', 'not doing well enough to continue' and 'didn't get on with my teachers' (Teese & Polesel 2003, p.143).

It is relevant to note that the employment available for early school leavers has changed dramatically in recent decades. Whereas in 1991 half the teenagers in work were working full-time, this had reduced to a quarter by 1999 (Teese & Polesel 2003, p.152).

Transitions

The last two or three years of secondary school are a critical transition period for most young people, with their school engagement and academic performance during this time strongly influencing their post-secondary education or entry into the labour market (Willms 2003).

The Brotherhood of St Laurence has a long-standing interest in assisting young people with their transitions from school to work and further education, as illustrated in the Transitions pilot project established in 1997 (MacDonald 1999), the Parents As Career Transition Supports (PACTS) project (Bedson & Perkins 2006), services such as JPET, and our current planning around transition stages. The importance of the earlier transition from primary to secondary school for school engagement is the focus of the Doing It Differently project in which the Brotherhood is a partner (Butler et al. 2005). The present research explores the influence of school engagement and other factors at the time of transition beyond compulsory schooling.

The concept of young people achieving independence in a simple transition from school to work is no longer widely applicable. Young people now combine both study and work in various ways.

Part-time work has become a normal part of life for many secondary students (Smith & Green 2001). The majority completing Year 12 have had part-time jobs and the full-time student is likely to be a part-time worker for many years. The question is raised of whether the current transition into adulthood involves an extended youth as young people study longer, or whether they are entering adulthood younger having to balance the responsibilities of work, education and the rest of their life.

Social exclusion

A key concern arising from stage 6 of the Life Chances Study when the children were aged 11 and 12 (Taylor & Fraser 2003) was the extent to which the children in low-income families were being excluded from fully participating in their schooling because of the costs of school activities, and the likely impact on their future education and career paths. The children from low-income families were missing out on school excursions and outings because of costs, and also had difficulties affording 'proper' uniforms, books and fees. These same children who missed out on 'extras' or even 'basics' at school were also much less likely to have family holidays or outings or be able to take part in sport or music outside school than were their peers in higher income families. Other aspects of exclusion faced by some of the children ranged from lack of health care to racism.

The Life Chances Study

The Life Chances Study is a longitudinal study of children born in 1990 in inner Melbourne. It started as a population study which aimed to include all children born in two inner suburbs in selected months. The inner areas had a very diverse population including high and low income groups and a range of ethnic backgrounds. The study commenced with 167 children and has followed them and their families over the years as many moved away from the inner suburbs.

Aims and objectives

The broad aims of the Life Chances Study overall are:

- to examine over an extended period of time the life opportunities and life outcomes of a small group of Australian children, including the influences of social, economic and environmental factors on children's lives
- to compare the lives of children in families on low incomes with those in more affluent circumstances and
- to contribute to the development of government and community interventions to improve the lives of Australian children, particularly those in disadvantaged circumstances.

In 2005, all the children in the Life Chances Study turned 15 and thus reached the age when education is no longer compulsory in Victoria (although there were already plans to increase the Victorian leaving age to 16). At stage 7 of the study, we followed up selected 15 year olds towards the end of 2005 to explore their engagement with school and the transitions they were making.

The research sought to gain a depth of understanding of the young people's situation and experiences through interviews with the young people themselves and with their parents, and through the use of longitudinal data. The objectives of stage 7 were:

- to explore the young people's engagement with school at the end of compulsory schooling
- to study the factors that include them in or exclude them from continuing participation at school (including cost of education, family context, peer influence)
- to explore their future career plans
- to compare parents' and young people's attitudes to education
- to document the socio-economic situation of the families.

The research questions for stage 7 included:

- How do young people see the role of education and learning in their present and future lives?
- What factors do young people on low incomes see as influencing their engagement with school?
- How do other aspects of their life (family, friends, work) influence their engagement with school?

Method

The research drew on the school engagement literature introduced above to develop questions which covered a wide range of aspects of school engagement (behavioural, emotional and cognitive), as well as repeating relevant questions from earlier stages of the study and allowing the young people to describe their own perspective on their situation.

The previous stage of the study (stage 6) had involved the full sample of all 142 children and their families still participating in the study when the children were aged 11 and 12 (Taylor & Fraser 2003). Stage 7 aimed to follow up the 34 of these children whose families had been on low incomes in their first 12 years of life, as a qualitative study of the children 'at risk' of early school leaving. For comparison, 10 children who were identified as advantaged at the beginning of the study and had grown up in relatively high-income families were also included. As one low-income family declined to participate and two high-income families could not be interviewed within the study time frame, the results are based on interviews with 41 families (40 children and 39 parents). One young person was not interviewed because of the severity of his disability, and two parents were not interviewed.

Family income has been one of the key variables throughout the study and is discussed further below and in the Appendix.

Interviews were held in November and December 2005. While most interviews were face to face, those interstate were by phone. Bilingual interviewers or an interpreter were used when needed for parent interviews.

The data collection included:

- an interview with the parent (primary carer) – topics included household changes, employment, child's health and behaviour, school, family income and costs, future plans (39 families)
- the previously used self-completion questionnaire, 'About Myself', (4 pages), updated for 15 year olds – attitude to school, family, school achievement, activities and recreation, school costs, future plans (40 young people)
- an in-depth interview with the 15 year old – with open ended questions on school, family, money and work, friends and activities, future plans (40 young people)
- school reports, if available (24 reports).

Interviews with the 15 year olds were tape-recorded and transcribed for thematic and case study analysis. The parents' interview data and About Myself responses were entered into SPSS.

Strengths and limitations of the method

The strengths of the research include its ability to draw on data from the families over 15 years, the relatively open-ended discussion with the young people about their perspectives on their lives, having both the parents' and their children's perspectives, and having the contrast between the low and high-income families. Many longitudinal studies are survey-based and do not have the same opportunity to draw on the viewpoints of the participants. However a one-off interview with the

15 year olds gave only limited opportunity to develop rapport. Some were quite aware of having been interviewed at 11 or 12, while others had little memory of this. Some 15 year olds were very ready to discuss their lives at length, while others were quite reserved. There was a mixture of rather standard and extremely candid responses.

The families of the Life Chances Study cannot be seen as a representative sample of all Australian families because of their initial inner urban recruitment. Those in stage 7 were selected even further according to their long-term family income patterns. Both the initial selection of the families and the size of the sample limit the extent generalisations can be made from the data to the wider population. However, the experiences of the young people in this study will reflect those of others in similar situations and are a useful supplement to large-scale survey studies.

Findings

This report presents some of the changes in the families over the years, some case studies of young people, and an exploration of the 15 year olds' engagement with education and the factors influencing this.

As in each stage of the Life Chances study we are struck by the diversity of the life situations of a group of children, now young people, who were born in the same small geographic area at the same time. As 15 year olds some are strongly engaged with school, others are rather half-hearted about it and a small number have left school, permanently or temporarily. Some have entered the world of work with part-time jobs and are dealing with the independence this brings. Some live very much within the confines of their family home. Some have travelled and lived overseas, others have more local horizons.

In brief, at the end of the year they turned 15, the school situation of the 33 young people who grew up on low incomes (20 females and 13 males) was as follows:

- Year 10 8
- Year 9 20
- Year 8 1
- Special school 2
- Left school 2

The large majority of these young people attended government schools (27 including the two special schools; three attended Catholic schools and one a private ethnic school).

The school situation of the eight young people in families with high income (4 females and 4 males) was:

- Year 10 3
- Year 9 5

Two went to government schools, one to a Catholic school and five to other non-government schools.

The family context

Immigrant and language background

All the 41 young people were born in Melbourne in 1990. The 33 young people from low-income families had diverse ethnic backgrounds: 20 had both parents from non-English speaking birthplaces, eight had both Australian-born parents and the remainder had one Australian-born parent and one born overseas. Some overseas-born parents had arrived as refugees in the 1980s; others had come to Australia as children themselves. Twenty of the young people spoke a language other than English at home, Cantonese and Turkish being the most frequent. Other home languages included Hmong, Vietnamese, Arabic and Assyrian. While most of the young people also spoke English at home, six spoke only their parents' language at home. Over half of the mothers from non-English speaking birthplaces still described themselves as speaking English not well (9) or not at all (2), with similar figures for fathers. (Six of the mothers said that language was a problem for them communicating with their child's school.) A few of the 15 year olds attended weekend classes in their home language (Chinese, Vietnamese or Arabic).

Of the eight high-income families, all the parents but one were Australian-born or born in an English-speaking country and all households were English-speaking.

Family structure

As 15 year olds, 18 of the 33 from low-income families were living with both their natural parents, one with a natural parent and a step parent and 13 with a sole parent (some with their mother, others with their father). One girl had left home and was living interstate with an aunt and cousins.

The largest family still had eight children living at home, while in some other families older children had moved out. While the 15 year olds could often turn to older siblings for help with homework and advice about careers, some found younger siblings very ‘annoying’. Some enjoyed the younger children, although others resented being used as child minders.

In the eight high-income families, five young people were with both natural parents, while three whose families that had separated usually spent equal time with both parents.

Location and housing

When the study started all the families lived in Melbourne’s inner suburbs, but most have moved over the years. At 15, only two of those in low-income families had remained in those inner suburbs, though another two had moved away and returned. Most lived elsewhere in Melbourne, three in regional towns and two interstate. More than half (19) were living in houses their parents were purchasing or owned, nine were in public rental housing, four were living in houses belonging to other relatives and one in private rental.

Of the high-income families, three had remained in inner Melbourne, four were elsewhere in and around Melbourne and one was interstate—all in homes they owned or were purchasing.

Some had experienced international travel. Among the low-income families, for example:

- one girl had spent three months with her father’s family in Syria during the school year
- another family planned to visit Mecca and Turkey the next year.

Among the high-income families:

- two girls were planning to go as exchange students to France in the next year
- one was hoping to live in Israel for a period.

Family income

Because family income is an important factor in life chances, the study has been concerned with changes in income levels and we have grouped the young people for some analysis in terms of their family income.

The low-income families: Throughout the Life Chances Study low income has been defined as 120 per cent of the Henderson Poverty Line, and high income as above the cut-off for receipt of the former Family Payment (now Family Tax Benefit) (Taylor & Fraser 2003). The measure takes into account family size and structure (see Appendix for further notes on income and updating of income level). For this report the ‘low-income families’ are defined as those who were on low incomes across the first 12 years of the 15 year old’s life (that is they were on low incomes at two or three of the three first main stages [as infants, aged 3 and aged 6] and also when the children were aged 11 or 12).

Most families that had been on low incomes in the first 12 years of the study were still on low incomes when their child was aged 15. Family income was becoming more difficult to assess with

teenage and older children working part-time or even full-time but not necessarily contributing to the household expenses. A few families (we assess six) had increased their income somewhat above the low income level, but none had reached the high income category. (We continue to refer to these families as part of the low-income group for the purposes of this report). In these families income had increased as one or both parents had gained work, but these jobs were generally low paid and, especially for large families, did not provide what they felt was an adequate living wage.

The high-income families: For this report the ‘high-income families’ are the eight selected families who had all been on high incomes at earlier stages. All remained in the high income category (one mother who had separated was now just below the high income level, but the child lived half time with the father whose income remained high).

Changes in financial situation

The parents rated the changes in their family’s financial situation since the children were 11 and 12. Roughly a third felt they were better off financially, a third that they were worse off and a third that their situation was much the same. This was similar for both the low and high-income families. The low-income families who felt they were better off mentioned increased family employment, more saving and better budgeting. Those whose situation was much the same made comments such as: ‘There’s no job to do, so same as three years ago’ or ‘When they’re small you have difficulty and when they’re big you have difficulty’. Those who were worse off financially emphasised the higher expenses (including school costs) of the children as they grew older. Some mentioned housing costs, including renovations to have more bedrooms and some talked of the ‘skyrocketing’ cost of living, including food and petrol.

Parents’ education and employment

Parents’ educational levels differed markedly between the income groups. Many of the low-income parents had limited formal education (for 12 mothers and 12 fathers out of the 33 their highest level of education was Year 9 or less) and only one mother and one father had tertiary qualifications. In contrast all eight mothers in high-income families had tertiary education as did six fathers.

In the 33 low-income families, many of the parents were not in paid employment and few were in full-time jobs. Nine of these mothers were in paid work, with only three working full time. Seven were looking for work. The jobs of those who were working included aged care, child care, sandwich hand, supermarket manager and school crossing attendant. Three mothers were studying English and another three studying for qualifications such as aged or disability care. Thirteen fathers were in paid work, five of them full-time, and another five were looking for work. Their jobs included factory worker, gardener, packer, presser, shop owner, waiter and welder.

The situations of six young people whose families that had increased their income above the low income level were as follows:

- both parents working full-time on shift work 1
- father working full-time (mother not employed) 3
- mother working full-time, father about to start casual process work 1
- sole parent working and taking in boarders 1

In the families with children older than the 15 year olds, two-thirds of the older children were working, some combining work and study. However a few were unemployed. Nine 15 year olds were living in households in which no-one was in paid employment.

In the eight high-income families, all the mothers and the fathers were in paid employment, typically in professional or management jobs. Half the mothers were working part time. The parents’ jobs included doctor, share trader, magazine editor, project manager and lecturer.

School engagement

To explore the 15 year olds' engagement with education and learning, we first consider their responses to some open-ended questions and then their responses to the relevant About Myself survey questions. (The full list of these About Myself responses is presented in the Appendix as Tables A2 and A3.) We then look at some individual case studies and examine some of the factors influencing this engagement. The experiences of the 15 year olds who have grown up in low-income families are presented first and these are later compared with those who grew up in high-income families (see page 36).

What is important now? The low-income 15 year olds

School is only one part of life for 15 year olds but we were keen to know how the young people saw its place. Without prompting specifically about education, we asked them what they felt were the most important things in their lives at present. Those in low-income families most frequently responded in terms of 'education' and 'school' (20 of the 33), often accompanied by either or both 'friends' and 'family'. For example:

School—I want to study hard and be a lawyer. Family—I love them and don't want anything to happen to them. Friends—we have so much fun.

The young people often described the high importance of education or school in terms of leading to a good job for the future.

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

A few were more immediately focused on the importance of getting schoolwork done including catching up on missed work. Some of those who did not mention education in response to this question confirmed its importance later on (see below).

After education, friends and family were the most frequently named as important. They spoke of friends in terms having fun, going out and meeting more people. One mentioned recent fights with friends. Family were important because 'they are there for me' and some were concerned about their family's well-being. Family provided a source of support for some and a focus of responsibility for others.

A number of young people named other aspects of their life as important. One, a Jehovah's Witness, mentioned her religion, 'Just like serving my God to the full'; for another being a volunteer lifeguard was really important. A girl who had left school and home said her work was most important at present because she needed the money; for another his work as a DJ meant that he had found what he wanted to do with his life.

Importance of school

Having asked in general what was important to the young people, we later asked specifically about the importance of school to their parents, to themselves and to their friends.

The 15 year olds overwhelmingly confirmed that their parents thought school was important for them. Many elaborated on their parents' views: 'They always talk about it and stuff' and 'Every time I complain, they say "Oh no, education comes first" '. Some emphasised their parents' insistence on their staying at school (for most this was to Year 12), even though many of their parents had had limited schooling themselves, and explained that staying at school was so they could get a good job:

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.

Absolutely. Like it's a rule, you're not allowed to leave school until you finish Year 12 and if there is some weird reason why you can't finish school you have to have a full-time job.

Some spoke of the encouragement and involvement they received from their parents:

She always makes sure that I get my assignments in on time and I'm always at school, I don't have days off.

Asked whether they themselves thought school was important, all the 15 year olds gave the 'right' answer of yes, although one specified only to Year 10 and another only to Year 12. A few described school's importance simply, in terms such as 'that's where I learn stuff'. More said that school was 'definitely' important for them and linked it to their future jobs and careers:

School's very important. You need to get somewhere in life and school's just like a gateway.

Yeah, very important, especially this generation. Cos there's more competition. My maths teacher explains how much competition there is and stuff, it's going to be really hard.

And did their friends think school was important for them? Half the 15 year olds thought that all or most of their friends saw school as important, while most others said some friends thought it important, but some did not. A few said either that their friends did not think it important or that they didn't know. Explanations of why friends did not favour school were diverse:

It depends which friends. Some friends think yes school's really important ... Some of them mature really quickly so they think they don't need school ... They've matured so they are ready for the real world.

My friends that smoke really don't care at all, which is very bad ... but my friend X she's really into school like me. She wants to go to Egypt and study the pyramids and all that stuff.

The one half of my friends does and the other half doesn't ... because they'd rather stay at home playing games and sometimes they don't really understand the work and stuff and they get lazy.

'About Myself' and school engagement

The 15 year olds completed the About Myself survey which repeated some questions they had been asked when they were aged 11 or 12, including questions relating to school engagement. They were asked whether each item applied to them 'always or often', 'sometimes' or 'seldom or never'.

Comparing answers at ages 11/12 and 15 (see Figure 1) showed a decrease in the young people on low incomes looking forward to school 'always or often', doing their homework on time and getting on well with their teachers. Like the low-income young people, those in high-income families showed a decrease in looking forward to school and doing homework as 15 year olds (Figure 2). Overall there was a decrease in enthusiasm for school over the first three years of secondary school, although almost half of all the 15 year olds still looked forward to school always or often and over half always or often enjoyed learning new things. The importance of friends at school strengthened, with nearly all the 15 year olds saying they had a good group of friends at school. Very few 15 year olds said they always or often felt left out at school, wagged school or fought with other kids (these responses were all from two boys from low-income families), although more replied 'sometimes' to these questions.

Figure 1 School engagement of the low-income young people at age 11/12 and age 15

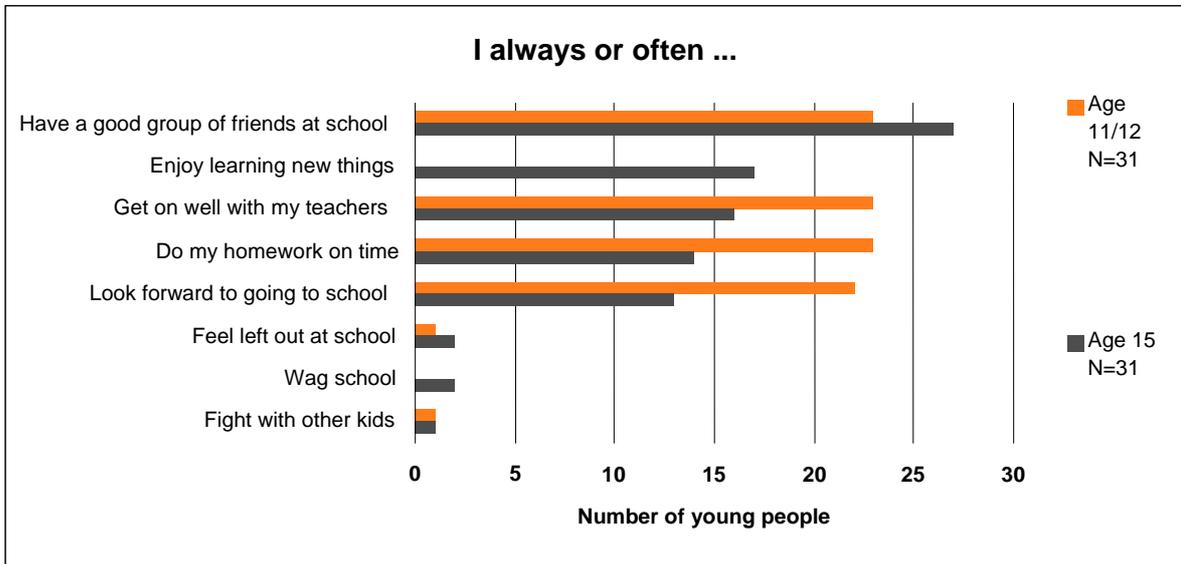
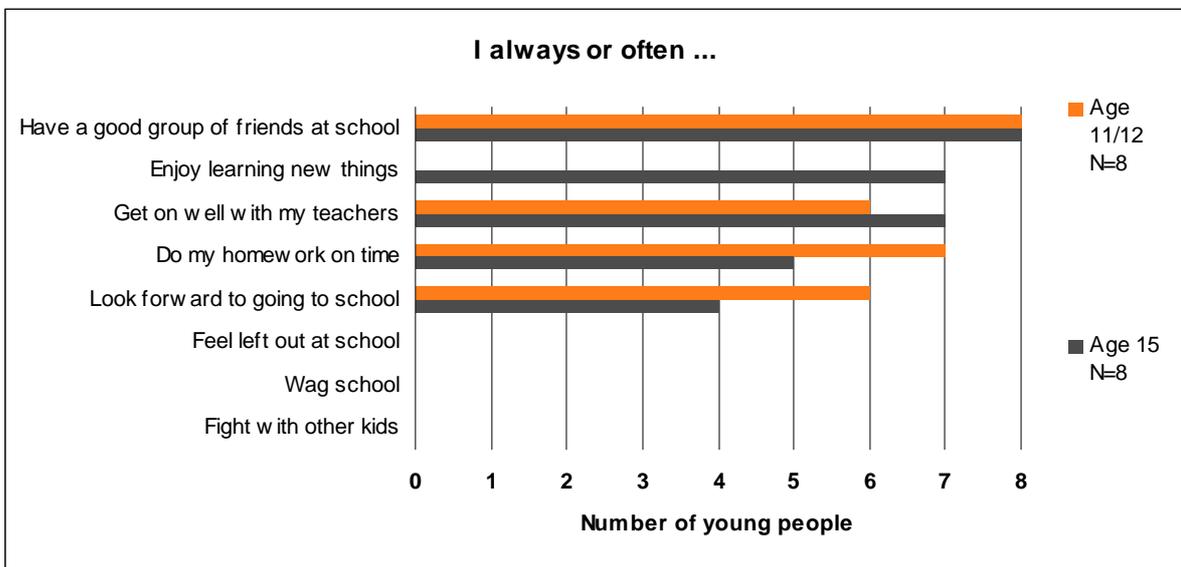
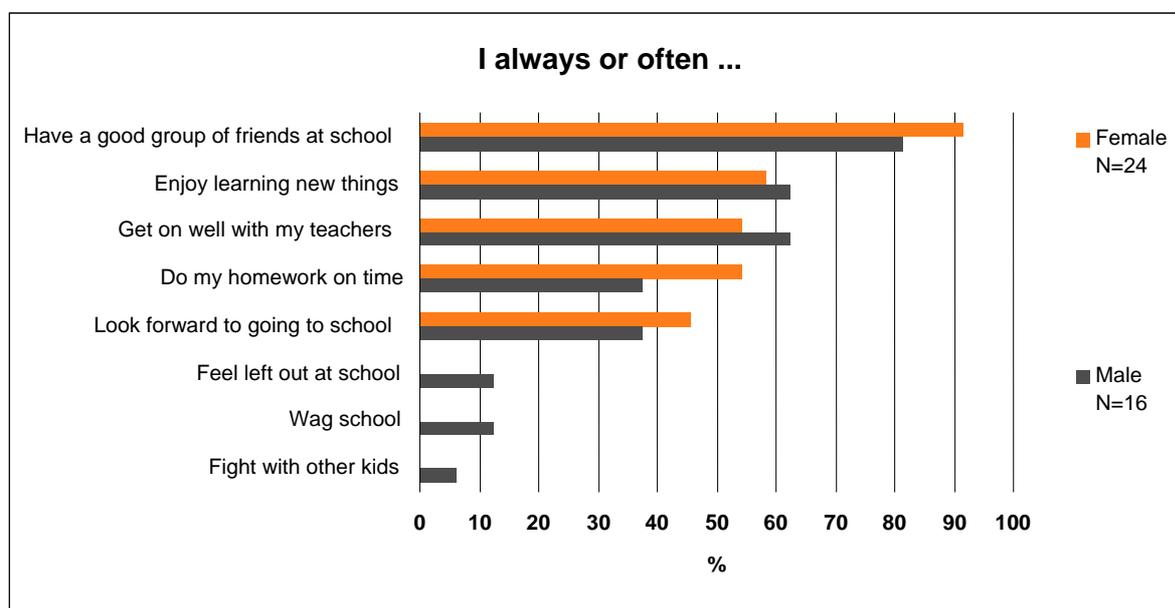


Figure 2 School engagement of the high-income young people at age 11/12 and age 15



There were limited gender differences (Figure 3), with boys somewhat less likely to do homework on time, but slightly more likely to feel left out, wag (stay away from school) and fight always or often.

Figure 3 School engagement age 15 comparing gender (all young people)



Note: Responses at age 15 included one young person who had not completed 'About Myself' at age 11/12.

Taking the one question of looking forward to school, an even greater variation is seen if one follows the individual young people over time. Figure 4 shows, for example, the changes for the 22 low-income young who always or often looked forward to school as 11 and 12 year olds. As 15 year olds, 10 still always or often looked forward to school, 10 did so sometimes and 2 seldom or never. However a few who only sometimes looked forward to school as 11 year olds, always or often did so by the time they were 15, showing they had settled well into their secondary school.

Figure 4 Changes in looking forward to school from age 11/12 to age 15

Family income level	Look forward to school Age 11/ 12	Look forward to school Age 15	
Low income (N=31)	Always or often 22	Always or often 10	
		Sometimes 10	
		Seldom or never 2	
	Sometimes 9	Always or often 3	
		Sometimes 5	
		Seldom or never 1	
	High income (N=8)	Always or often 6	Always or often 4
			Sometimes 2
		Sometimes 2	Sometimes 2

School engagement score

A simple school engagement score was created by coding the eight About Myself items '0' for a positive response (for example always or often look forward to school, seldom or never feel left out), '1' for sometimes and '2' for a negative response (for example, seldom or never look forward to school, always or often wag school). This gives a potential range from highly engaged (0) to highly disengaged (24). In our sample the range was from 0 to 12:

- Scores 0 or 1 could be seen as highly engaged (4 low-income and 4 high income young people)
- Scores 2 and 3 as medium engagement (15 low-income and 4 high-income young people)
- Scores of 4 to 12 as low engagement (14 low-income young people).

There was a marked difference between the low-income and high-income young people, with no high-income young people among the low engagement group. While simple indicators allow some comparisons they also conceal a lot of data, as Figures 1 to 4 suggest, and as Frederick et al. (2004) note).

Below we explore the situations of some of the 15 year olds from low-income families in more detail.

Case studies of disengagement

The About Myself questionnaire and the interviews both contained questions about engagement with school. Drawing on these, we can explore the interaction of factors in the young people's engagement. To commence, a number of case studies are presented.

The five young people who were least engaged with school are introduced below (pseudonyms are used). An obvious indicator of disengagement with school for a 15 year old could be having left school. Two young people in the study had already left school—one who had lost contact totally (Zoe) and one with a partial link still to education (Mike). Three young people had missed considerable amounts of schooling and although they were currently attending school, their future attendance was uncertain (Nicole, Jack and Sue).

Two 15 year olds who have left school

Zoe moved interstate and had lost all contact with school

'Since I went off school I can't remember anything that I learned now.'

Early in Year 9, Zoe left school to move interstate to live with relatives. She just wanted to see what it was like. She had thought she might go to school in her new location, but did not have enough money because she had to contribute to household expenses so she decided to work instead. Work was the most important thing for her now because she needed to get money 'to stay up here'. She had been working in a fast-food shop for a few months, but found her work very tiring and didn't like 'rude customers'. She worked 4½ hours three days a week on an hourly rate of \$8. This money was mainly spent on food and bills. She would prefer to work in a clothes shop instead.

School: She liked school (a single-sex government school) and enjoyed having friends at school and could not think of anything she didn't like there. She felt she did less well in English than her classmates. She chose not to participate in extra activities at school: 'Probably I was too lax'. Sometimes she would not go to school because she 'just felt like staying at home'. Since leaving, she had had no contact with school friends.

Family: Zoe was one of a large refugee family whose parents separated recently. Her parents were not happy about her leaving school. She missed her family in Melbourne but was unsure whether she would return. She had a boyfriend but no other friends in her new location.

Future: She was not really interested in continuing her studies and said she now could not remember anything she learned at school. Her hope for the future was to find a better job, but she had no idea what that might be.

As an 11 year old: In Year 6 she had wanted to be a doctor: 'I would love to be a doctor because you could help people who are sick or ill so they get better'. Then she had been living with her unemployed parents and six siblings in a three-bedroom high-rise flat. She said school was good and liked studying and making friends, but she didn't like the bullying. She looked forward to school but was anxious about starting high school. She had had two changes of primary school with a short move interstate. At that stage we would not have predicted her early school leaving.

Mike stopped going to school but has been going to an alternative education program

'Well I'm not really a school person.'

School: Mike had stopped going to school earlier in the year (he was in Year 8). He had previously changed schools as he moved in and out of foster care. He commented, 'You just settle into one school and then you've got to move again'. He did not like his most recent school, he didn't like waking up early and having to go, and 'I just decided second term not to go ... All the kids were just real terrors. They were big bullies ... It's like not a very good school'. He seldom looked forward to school, only sometimes felt he had friends and often fought with others, but said he got on well with teachers, especially one 'you could talk to'. He felt he did about as well as others. He did sport, music and drama; he missed out on camps because of costs but did not see this as a problem.

Since leaving school: He had attended a special youth education support program run by a welfare agency, which met twice a week with four participants. They did maths, English, cooking and computers. He liked the shorter hours and the people were nice: 'They just encourage you to go to school and stuff like that ... It's just easier to get along because there's not so many of you.' This program had finished for the year. Next year he spoke of going to the local Neighbourhood Learning Centre.

Family: Mike had a relatively stable life until his mother died when he was 10, and he developed behaviour and attention problems. He spent some time in foster care with relatives but was now living with his father, a disability pensioner. What he liked best about home was sleeping. What he didn't like was 'when there [was] no cereal in the cupboard'. Asked about his favourite times with his family he said, 'We don't spend much time together'. His temper was a problem. With friends, 'We just hang out and go do shopping or something'.

Future: He hadn't tried to get work, but wanted in the future to work in a bar.

As an 11 year old: In Year 5 (he had repeated Prep) Mike wanted to be a fireman. He looked forward to school.

While Mike had attended only one primary school, subsequent school changes were difficult for him and his father was not able to give him a lot of support. His links to a welfare agency might be able to keep him 'in the system' for some future training.

Three 15 year olds who have missed a lot of school

Nicole missed school because of running away from home

'I couldn't really catch up.'

Nicole's current disengagement with school seemed related to her having missed a lot of school because she ran away from home, rather than from school itself. She did not explain why she ran away from home. She was now having difficulty catching up at the end of Year 9 and she might leave school altogether.

I ran away a couple of times this year, and kind of got in trouble ... Now I just gotta start catching up with a lot of schoolwork cos I missed out on a lot of school ... cos I'm failing in pretty much everything. I didn't pass any of my exams. I just gotta catch up in school. And next year I've just gotta keep studying and make sure I keep up to date with everything. And just on the weekends, I don't just want to stay at home and do homework. I have to go out with friends or something.

School: She changed high schools during Year 8 and said she liked her current school, a government girls' school:

I didn't really like the other school, I didn't like it there that much. Like I'd wake up every morning not wanting to go to school. But now I'm happy going to school. I've got heaps of friends there. I always have fun. Teachers are a *lot* nicer ... The school's helping me a lot with everything. They're really good there.

But she later added:

I got along with Miss S at the start of the year—she's the counsellor there, the social worker—but I don't talk to her any more. (*You don't want to talk to her any more?*) No, I don't want to talk to anyone ...

She was enthusiastic about some subjects:

In science and English and SOSE I was doing good, but when I left and came back I didn't understand any of it and I just thought, 'Nah, stuff it, I'm not doing it'. But I've never understood maths, I never do it. (*Her best achievement?*) Probably in science, I learn a lot more in science. And just before I ran away, my parent-teacher interview and my reports and that were really good, and I was doing well in pretty much every subject besides maths.

She also liked sport: 'I find it fun'. She missed some activities but not because of cost: Depends on what it is. If I don't like it then I won't do it. The camps, excursions, I go on all of them. Camp was last week, but because I'd missed out on so much school ... Dad had already paid for it ... they said, 'We don't think it's a good idea for you to go, you should catch up on your schoolwork' and stuff like that. So I wasn't allowed to go.

Family: Nicole had a very disrupted early childhood, living with her mother who had health and financial problems and very unstable housing. After her mother's death she lived with her aunt and in more recent years with her father, a sole parent who worked shifts, and his parents.

She liked some aspects of home, although she talked about home being messy with too many people and dogs. What upset her now was:

Dad doesn't really let me go out much. ... I'm not allowed to hang around with [friend] any more cos she's the one I got arrested with. So I'm not meant to see her any more but I still do.

She was planning to look for work over the summer.

Future: She said her father and she both think school is important:

Yeah definitely. He thinks it's the most important thing right now ... Yeah I think it's really important too, but I just ... the only way right now for me to full on start getting completely full marks is just if I keep studying, studying and that's not what I'm like. I just

can't keep studying ... (*Do you ever think about leaving school?*) Yeah, all the time. I feel like leaving when I'm 16, but then I'm like 'Oh no, what am I going to do? ... I'm gonna go to school next year if they don't keep me down this year. If I get to Year 10, I'll go. But if I get kept down, I'll probably just leave school ... I want to try and go all the way through Year 12 if I can ... I was thinking about getting an apprenticeship for hairdressing. Otherwise I was going to look into child care, like babysitting and that ... [Dad's] really helpful. He said that he was going to take me around to the day care centres, child care centres and just ask if I could help out there for the day just to get an idea of what it's like.

As an 11 year old: Nicole said she wanted to go to university to learn to be a lawyer. However she only sometimes looked forward to school and she sometimes felt left out. She was at her fourth primary school.

Her disrupted early years and subsequent difficulties put her at risk of not settling to school or training, in spite of her father's and the school's attempts at support.

Jack wagged school because he was bored and got into trouble

'The kids around here are just as dumb as the teachers.'

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.

School: Jack rarely looked forward to school or did homework on time. He found going to senior school 'pretty intimidating' at first and did not really feel welcome at the school. He often felt left out.

He felt he did better than most of his class in English but worse in maths. His report noted some 40 truancies and unexplained absences and described him as 'a very capable student, adversely affected by inconsistent attendance and effort'.

Family: Jack lives with his sole parent mother. Jack's mother said, 'School has failed to engage him in work as the classes are too noisy and uninteresting'. She felt he was bored at school and lazy.

As a sole parent, she found it hard to afford everyday clothes, entertainment and pocket money and said as Jack grew up, 'he is more expensive to provide for'. Jack felt the family didn't have enough money for phone bills, electricity etc. He mentioned that he had missed out on school photos two years in a row. He had not had any paid work, since his one or two attempts at cold canvassing failed.

Friends: He had a group of older friends he met at a youth club. They had cars and went 'for cruises and that'. He felt going out a bit late with his friends also affected his attitude to school and attendance.

Future: He wanted to finish Year 12 and do an IT apprenticeship. He was also interested in engineering, mechanics and cars.

As an 11 year old: Jack wanted to be an actor or a pro skateboard rider. He only sometimes looked forward to school.

Jack had been to four primary schools as his mother moved house. His early life had been quite disrupted with family moves and separation. Current issues include costs and how school could better engage him.

Sue missed school after she moved from one parent to the other and changed schools

'I'm probably not smart enough to go to uni.'

Sue refused to go to school for some months in Year 9. She had been living with her father and going to a co-ed school; when she moved to another town to live with mother she changed to a girls' school.

School: She said moving school was a big thing. She said she did well in Year 7, but went downhill in Year 8, because she was with a friend: 'All we did was talk'. She saw Year 8 as her worst year. What she did not like about school in Year 9:

Girls' schools are really bitchy and I really hate that ... I was going to move school and that's why I stopped going to school for a while and I was getting into trouble at school and at home, second term. I've caught up since then. When I wasn't coming to school, they made me feel like they really didn't want me there ... The assistant principal made me feel like I was so low.

However she had subsequently found her coordinator was very encouraging about her change of attitude since she returned to school.

Family: She now lived with her Australian-born mother, a sole parent, and stayed at her boyfriend's place twice a week. She didn't see much of her father—maybe once a month. She missed her little brother who lived with their father. Her mother worked a lot, but she was there to cook tea.

Future: She worked at her mother's shop over the holidays and would again. She wanted to finish Year 12. She thought about leaving at the end of Year 10 and going to TAFE, but recognised there are better job choices if she finishes Year 12: 'I'm probably not smart enough to go to university ... I used to want to be a teacher. I could do ballet or be a beautician'.

Her mother suggested Sue get a job to help financially, explaining: 'Her phone bills are dreadful'. Her mother would like her to do Year 12 and TAFE.

As an 11 year old: Sue wanted to be a singer or a teacher and always looked forward to school. She had changed primary school once in Prep.

Issues for Sue have included the school's attitude to her missing school. It seems that after a difficult period she may have settled, indicating that school engagement may improve over time.

Other types of disengagement

Other 15 year olds showed various degrees and aspects of disengagement with school, for example sometimes wagging school, only sometimes looking forward to school and sometimes feeling left out. Some expressed negative attitudes to school, teachers and often their own abilities. Some of these students nevertheless hoped to finish school to Year 12, others did not.

Other young people who were disengaged from school in various ways included:

- a boy who was planning to leave at the end of Year 10 to go to TAFE
- a girl in Year 10 who had been asked to leave school a few weeks ago after some trouble but would start at a new school next year
- a girl who liked school but was on 'zero tolerance' for behaviour issues, including bullying
- a boy who seldom looked forward to his current school and would start a new school in Year 10.

Absence in itself was not necessarily an indicator of disengagement from school, as for one girl who had missed three months of school early in Year 9 visiting relatives in Syria, an approved absence, or for the high-income young people going on exchange to France.

Case studies of engagement

Four 15 year olds highly engaged with school

The four young people from low-income families who had the highest engagement with school on the About Myself score are introduced below, under the pseudonyms Elma, Hu, Shane and Li.

Elma attended a private Turkish school

School: Elma said the important things in her life at present were education, friends and teachers. In Year 9, she really liked school and her teachers: ‘They act more not like a teacher but a friend’. She mentioned feeling more comfortable that the boys and girls were separate at school. Her favourite times were during science, art and sport: ‘I just like learning stuff, like the planets and the human body and stuff’. She looked forward next year to doing ‘science experience’ visiting a university. Her best achievements were her marks. She participated in sports and drama, but would like to do more sport. Her recent report showed her work to be close to the class average.

Family: Elma lived with her parents (who came from Turkey) and three siblings. Her father, who ran a shop, had been sick but had recovered. They might have to sell their house because the mortgage payments were too high. She liked home, ‘just staying around with my family and when visitors come over’. She currently helped in her father’s shop: ‘It just gives more confidence to speak and it’s fun’.

Future: She hoped to go to uni, work in her dad’s shop and travel overseas. She wanted to do something like become a doctor or scientist.

As an 11 year old: Elma wanted to be ‘a doctor because I want to help the people that are sick and if mum is sick at home I would know what to do’, although she was worried about seeing blood. She looked forward to going to school but sometimes felt left out ‘because in sport I’m the last to get picked’. She had changed school once.

Hu did well at maths

Hu said the important things in his life now were ‘family, friends, education and health’.

School: His favourite times at school were lunchtimes, his best achievement his persistently high marks in maths. He enjoyed going to Tasmania on camp for a week. He enjoyed sports. But he worried that his communication skills were poor. His current report showed him getting As in maths and Chinese.

Family: Hu is the fourth child of a large family with parents from Vietnam. His father had had several periods of unemployment and some health problems. At home Hu enjoyed talking to his older brothers, but felt sometimes there was nothing to do. He knew his parents worried about money, but he thought the family had enough: ‘They generally put education purposes as a first priority’. He hadn’t done any paid work, but hoped to get a part-time job soon. With friends, he enjoyed hanging around: ‘We go to some shopping centres and bum around’. But his parents didn’t let him go out with his friends enough, which upset him ‘so that’s why I don’t work so hard at my education’.

Future: His parents wanted him to be a doctor or a nurse. He wanted to do VCE maths, physics and chemistry, finish school and go to uni, but did not have a specific career in mind.

At age 11: He wanted to be a doctor, looked forward to school but sometimes felt left out. He had no changes of primary school.

Shane attended a special school

School: Shane had always attended a special development school because of his speech difficulties, and was now in Year 9. He looked forward to school, had good friends there and got on with the teachers. He said the most important thing had been the drama program at school. He liked music best and maths least. His favourite times at school were sport, music and lunch. His best achievement was guitar: his mother has a CD of his playing. He also helped with a meals-on-wheels program.

Family: Shane and his siblings lived with his unemployed father and spent every second weekend with his mother who received a disability pension. At home he liked best riding his bike, but he didn't like doing dishes (even though he got pocket money from his dad for this). He bought stuff for his mobile and would like a DJ mixer but that would cost \$1000. He was getting involved with a community FM radio station.

Future: Shane wanted to do Year 12 and be a DJ, like his friend.

He was not interviewed at Year 6 because of severe family disruptions. At 15, his situation had become much more stable. (His school report was not available.)

Li enjoyed school and was doing well

School: In Year 9 Li thought her school was great, and enjoyed seeing her friends and learning interesting things. Education was important to her and she also wanted a part-time job so she could help out her sole parent mother, because money was very tight. She felt she did better than most other students overall and in maths. She did no extra activities in or out of school with the exception of attending Chinese school. Her current report gave her As for English, maths and Chinese.

Home: Li's parents came from Vietnam (where her mother had only three years of primary schooling). They divorced some years ago and her mother struggled financially (and with serious health problems) to bring up her children as a sole parent.

Future: She wanted to get a part-time job and help her mother, become independent and go to university. She now wanted to be a scientist. She also would like to teach at the Chinese school.

At age 11: Li was in temporary housing with her mother who was unwell and very depressed. The situation has since stabilised to some extent. She had three changes of primary school.

Issues for these young people

The nine cases illustrate the diversity of school engagement of young people from low-income backgrounds. However, simple individual and family background factors or school factors do not clearly differentiate those who are most engaged with school from those who are least. Some of the factors are summarised below.

While studies point to higher engagement among girls (for example Fullerton 2002), there were both boys and girls among the disengaged and among the engaged 15 year olds in this study.

Family factors seen as risk factors in wider studies of engagement include low socio-economic background, sole parent families and foreign birthplace (Willms 2003). As well as low family income, the five disengaged and four most engaged young people shared other aspects of disadvantage in their family background. Three young people in each group had been identified in earlier stages of the study as very disadvantaged (in terms of family functioning and health). Three of the disengaged young people had been 'in care' at some stage, as had one of the engaged. Both groups include sole parent families; however while none of the five disengaged young people was living with both their parents, two of the four engaged young people were. In terms of ethnic background, all the young people themselves were Australian-born. In both groups there were some Australian-born parents and some from non-English-speaking birthplaces, although there were more Australian-born parents among the disengaged young people. Both groups had parents with limited formal education. Only one parent completed Year 12 and some in both groups had as little as three years of primary school.

School factors included changes of schools. Some but not all of the disengaged young people had had many changes of school. The engaged young people typically had fewer changes. In terms of academic achievement, more of the engaged young people were doing well at school than were the disengaged. With reference to type of school, some of the girls who were engaged and some who were disengaged with school were attending girls' schools.

Issues for educators

Assuming that further contact with the education system is desirable for 15 year olds who are disengaged, questions for educators raised by the case studies include:

- What training opportunities are there for 15 year olds without a strong school record and no financial resources who have left school? (Zoe and Mike)
- How might schools support young people who have 'chosen' to be absent from school to return and stay? (Nicole, Jack, Sue)
- How might schools break the cycle of absences leading to getting behind in study and in turn to disengagement and further absences? (Jack, Nicole)
- How might schools best engage those who have had many changes of school? (Mike)
- How might schools provide challenging work for students who are bored? (Jack)
- How might help be provided to those who feel left out and/or are being bullied? (Sue, Mike, Jack)
- How might schools support students who are away from home and have to work to also stay in school? (Zoe)
- How might young people outside the mainstream school system be assisted to find accessible and appropriate alternative education programs? (Mike)

Influences on school engagement – 15 year olds in low-income families

The case studies above illustrate some of the diverse aspects of engagement with school for these young people from low-income families. Below we look in more detail at some of the factors that influence this engagement, first looking at school factors (school achievement, relationships with teachers, relationships with peers, participation and school costs and parent-school contact), then family and other factors, mostly from the young people's perspective. These are explored first for young people from low-income families, and later the experiences of those in high-income families are compared.

School factors

Achievement at school

The 15 year olds' academic achievement at school interweaves with their school engagement, but the relationship is not a simple one of good marks always being associated with a positive attitude to school, as was also pointed out in the large-scale PISA study (Willms 2003).

We asked the 15 year olds to rate themselves as to whether they did better than, as well as or worse than other students in their class. For some, but not all, students we also had their school reports. The large majority (26) of the 33 low-income young people said overall they did about as well as most in their class. Only five said they did better than most and only one (Nicole who had missed school running away and was struggling to catch up) said she did not do as well. The five who said they did better than most had mixed levels of engagement with school. They included:

- a girl (Li) who was highly engaged with school and whose report had As and Bs (Vietnamese sole mother)
- a girl who had a good report but only sometimes looked forward to school and sometimes felt left out (Australian sole mother)
- a boy with a good report but who only sometimes looked forward to school (Vietnamese family)
- a boy (Jack) whose report indicated he was capable but whose school attendance was poor and attitude to school negative (Australian sole mother)
- a boy who had struggled at school academically and wanted to leave at Year 10 (Turkish parents).

Looking back, these young people's school achievement at Year 6 (teacher's assessment) was also not closely related to their school engagement as 15 year olds.

The 15 year olds often had strong feelings about particular subjects as part of what they did or did not like about school. Their enthusiasm often related to their competence in the subject and/or to their relationship with the teacher. For example one girl talked of how she loved art, English and SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment) but hated science: 'I don't get it so I don't like it'.

Teachers and school culture

The young people's relationship to their teachers was an important part of their engagement with school for some. Half the low-income 15 year olds said they always or often got on well with their teachers. Many got on well with some but not all of their teachers. A number had individual teachers whom they felt encouraged them particularly. Some talked positively about teachers who 'treat you like friends' and who 'don't treat us as children anymore'. In contrast, one boy commented: 'I don't muck up but I just get into trouble for everything I do'.

The complexity of racism in a multicultural society was illustrated by one girl who complained about her English teacher being racist: 'Like if I'm Turkish she'll treat me differently than other people because she's Indian'. A Vietnamese mother also told of a teacher who was racist so her daughter had not wanted to go to school.

Belonging at school

We asked the 15 year olds what their schools did to make students feel they belong and received very diverse responses. Many named some positive aspects, while a quarter said nothing, did not know or gave only negative responses.

The most frequent responses about what their schools did to make students feel they belong referred to group activities, anti-bullying strategies, transition programs and the teachers' attitudes. Some of the students felt particularly positive about some of the programs and about the teachers' attitudes. Examples of the range of comments include:

That's a big thing that's happening at the moment, the Principal did a big lecture thing at assembly about 'bullying, it's got to stop now' ... Actually two people from school who were really big bullies have been expelled. They were really bad, like they abused teachers.

They try and make the transition from primary to secondary school really smooth ... I think the school programs are good and you get to meet a lot of new students as well. Because in Year 9, you are also with Year 10s. You don't just have friends at your own level. You have friends throughout the whole school.

Like all the teachers try, or my teachers anyway, they always try and be there for every student and even out of school. Like Mr R [who had retired] he'd still come and check up on us now he's gone. (At a country high school)

My school has different co-curricular activities which represent our school ... My school tends to want a bit of a reputation to have a lot of activities.

A few emphasised that their school treated everyone equally. One girl said her school was good at accepting gay people; another spoke in terms of ethnic background:

(What does your school do to try and make students feel they belong?) Yeah they do a lot. They treat everyone pretty much equally. There's only three Aussie girls in my class, the rest are all Muslims or from different backgrounds. Yeah, it's a multicultural school, everyone's the same though.

The negative responses referred to schools being 'a bit bossy', making a student who had missed school feel unwelcome and trying but not succeeding:

Yeah they try ... It doesn't work. Like one day teachers are good to you and the next day they won't be good to you, they just ignore you, they just ignore you completely. Like if you want to be like that, I'll be like that.

One boy described himself as having a 'total makeover' of his attitude to school and people since the start of the year. Last year he said he was a bit of a brat but now he is serious about his future: 'I feel a lot happier because everyone at school calls me nice'.

Most of the students said they did feel they belonged at school. One felt she belonged with her friends but not with the teachers. Two felt they belonged only sometimes and two who said they did not belong had changed schools fairly recently: 'It's going to be one year, but I still feel new'.

Peers: friends and bullies

Their school friends were a very important aspect of their engagement with school for many young people. Most said they had a good group of friends at school and many named their favourite times at school as lunchtime with friends.

My Year 10 group, we're really close, cos we do a lot of activities together and everyone gets along and it's so good. Like you get the immature little Year 7s and 8s and 9s ... and the Year 10s they just go off and hang together and it's really good. And being able to go through school without any trouble. And people actually being mature.

However, friendships were not always trouble-free, and various disputes were mentioned. Some 15 year olds felt left out at school; some were involved in bullying and violence, as victims, perpetrators or bystanders. One girl commented: 'People bully each other, but no-one bullies me because I can protect myself'.

A couple of girls spoke of their anger management problems. For example:

I got into a fight ages ago and this girl she actually started hitting me and I was like trapped for a minute, cos I was trying to push her, like 'go away' and she ended up slapping me across the face and nearly knocked me over it was that hard and I had massive bruise on my face and everything. And as soon as that happened, like something clicked in my head and I went nuts. And she ended up being the one that was bleeding which was really bad. I didn't mean it. I was like 'Oh my god'. I punched her once in the face and it cut her eye and she was bleeding and as soon as I saw blood I stopped I went 'Oh my god I'm sorry'. And a teacher comes and ... Like I've been pretty good and I've went through like six months' anger management class ... It worked. It's good. I get along with a lot of people now.

Participation in school activities: costs and other barriers

Participation in extracurricular activities such as sport and music at school has been seen as an important aspect of school engagement (Fullarton 2002). Earlier stages of the Life Chances Study showed that children in low-income families were likely to miss out on school activities that had extra costs. At 15, they had varying involvement, with some students participating in many school activities, some having a specialty such as sport or music, and some not participating in any 'extras'. Of the 33, 24 took part in school sport, 14 in school music, 9 in drama, 8 in volunteer or community work and 4 in debating, while 8 did not take part in any of these school activities [4 boys and 4 girls].

We asked the young people whether they missed out on school activities and why, and whether missing out was actually a problem for them. Half the low-income 15 year olds said they did not miss out on school activities, while the other half missed out on at least some activities. For those who did miss out, cost of the activities was a reason for more than half, while the rest said they had chosen not to participate, generally because of lack of interest or skill, or an interaction of these. For example, comments were made about missing swimming carnival ('I can't swim that good') and drama ('I'm not really a performing person'), indicating issues of skills and self-confidence:

[I miss out] only if I don't want to go. Like there was a camp for a day and it's like in a tent and you have to have a cold shower and stuff. I'm like, nah, I won't go ... So that's just my choice. It wouldn't be just because Mum can't afford it or whatever.

Some young people were explicit about missing out on activities because of costs, while for others cost was one factor among many. (In the About Myself responses, only six indicated that they had missed out on school items because of costs and five of these named school camps as what they had missed. In the interviews, students spoke of missing out on camps, excursions and even school photos. When asked whether missing out was a problem for them, only half said it was.

One boy explained how missing excursions because of costs led to wagging school, both for himself and others:

This year there'll be a national art camp, I'm not sure that I'll be able to go on that. Even some of the ones where they take you down to the art galleries and stuff in the city some days, they're expensive ... Sometimes they ask you for like \$30 or \$40 and then you have to buy your own lunch and stuff down there. It's not very fair. (*Are there others in your school that would be in the same position?*) Lots of them, lots of kids just don't bother going, like they just don't go to school.

Camps are an interesting case study in their own right, with the 15 year olds finding a range of reasons for not going. Some of the 'can't be bothered' responses seemed to be linked to costs, self-confidence and parents' views:

I missed out on the going to the America thing, I missed out on that cos that's way too much money. I wouldn't have been able to go anyway cos Mum didn't like the whole idea of me being on the other side of the world. I reckon I'd freak out cos it's like a two-month thing, two months in America with strangers—I don't think so!

One girl explained weighing up the issues for going to a camp, including cost, friends and leeches:

I'm not really an outgoing person, so camps and all that stuff you have to prepare a lot, so I just really can't be bothered. And activities, it depends on the price and if you think it's worth it. And you also have to see if your friends are going or not. But if it's too expensive then I don't think I'll go ... this year ... The Year 9s just get the city campus as a camp. So this is the first year I did something like a camp that you pay \$30 and then you go out ... You can say that is part of the reason because we are not really rich, and we are having a little bit of financial problems ... So like considering that, and also that it doesn't really matter to me, I'm not really keen on camping, so yeah. And it's a good thing, I don't need to meet leeches and spiders.

One mother said her daughter missed out on camp 'because of paranoia and cost'. She explained: 'I use [paranoia] as an excuse. "Mum's scared" is a good excuse'.

Some young people were quite clear that missing out was not a problem for them. For example, one boy noted his family had said it was too expensive for him to go to camp but he had fun with the others who did not go.

The other side of the camp issue is some 15 year olds' great enthusiasm describing the camps and excursions they had attended. Such programs included city campus programs for outer suburban students, and city visits for country students. Some also mentioned specific activities as highlights, ranging from leadership programs to debating and cadets. One girl and her family were very proud of the trophy she won in 'Take a lead', for organising an appeal for tsunami victims and also a school formal.

When we interviewed the children as 11 and 12 year olds, some were quite clear that they were missing out on school activities because of costs. As 15 year olds, fewer seemed to identify this, perhaps due to lower expectations. Interestingly 11 parents said their teenager had missed out on school activities due to cost during the past year, but only six of the 15 year olds said this. For example, one mother spoke of the difficulty of paying \$500 for elective VCE subjects ('I am able to borrow some advance money from Centrelink') and that her daughter had missed out on drama and dancing because of costs, while the daughter stated she had not missed out on anything because of costs. A Vietnamese mother spoke of difficulty with school costs and said she saw some as non-essential, so her daughter missed out, for example, on movie excursions. The girl did not mention this. Some mothers were quite distressed about their difficulties in meeting school costs. Another mother spoke of borrowing from her mother and sister to meet school costs. A sole father could not afford the school camp and had to borrow from his mother and use his credit card for fares for

school. Another mother had help with school uniforms from a charity. Another commented ‘Uniform costs are outrageous’.

While in the earlier years costs had tended to be for extra activities, parents spoke of the increased costs for subjects and books for Years 11 and 12, and items such as scientific calculators. One girl had been considering a TAFE course but because of the upfront fees had decided she had better finish school.

The situation of a 15 year old who was particularly explicit about missing out because of costs and the effect of this on school engagement is outlined below.

Tom had difficulty because of school costs

Tom’s parents had come to Australia 18 years ago as refugees from South East Asia. When Tom was 15, his father was unemployed and looking for work and his mother who had no schooling was looking after the youngest of her five children. She said she could not read Tom’s school report so did not know how he was getting on at school. She took the children to parent–teacher interviews to interpret for her. Her main concern was that she cannot afford a tutor for Tom who struggles in maths. She also found it difficult to pay for stationery, text books and a calculator, as well as shoes and clothes. She was dissatisfied with the school but could not afford for him to change schools due to fees and transport costs.

While Tom mostly looked forward to school, ‘I’ve got friends so every day is fun’, he sometimes waggled. He found understanding classwork and homework a bit challenging. He didn’t do any extra activities: ‘I’m not that confident and I’m not like a talker’.

Due to the family’s financial constraints he said he had missed out on books, uniform, camping, swimming programs and excursions. He explains the problem of missing camps:

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.

Asked whether his family had enough money for what they need, Tom said:
I don’t think we have enough money cos like we’ve got big family and like electricity, gas, bills ... we don’t even have a home phone.

Having to buy new books places additional strain on the family budget:
Since we had all those bills, like during Christmas, we have to buy text books and stuff. And the higher the grade, the more the books cost. And since they changed all the books, like it’s going to cost more. So yeah, I think we’ll be struggling this year. Cos my brother’s going to be in Year 9 and they changed the books so he can’t use mine ... I can’t use my sister’s books since she finished Year 12. So we have to buy all new books.

Tom wanted a new computer because the family’s was old and slow. Sometimes he felt left out because he had no money for transport to go out with his friends. He wanted to go to uni later or, if not, to start an apprenticeship, but said his parents wanted their children to become doctors: ‘They’ve never had education before and they don’t really understand it’.

School, work experience and career planning

Some 15 year olds had found their schools helpful in providing them with work experience and in assisting them to plan for their futures. One boy’s school had a community mentoring program from which a 65-year-old retired engineer helped him get work experience in a computer shop, ‘a very good experience’. Another boy had a less satisfactory placement. His teacher had applied for

him (because he did not have the internet) and he did two weeks at a big supermarket. The first week was all right but the second he just cleared the trash; and when he applied for a job there, he was not successful.

One girl spoke of having a part-time school-based apprenticeship organised through school for the following year: although it was not really the career she wanted she would try it out. In Year 11 she would like to do an apprenticeship as an electrician like her older brother.

Parents' contact with school

Various programs encourage parents' contact with their children's school as means of increasing support for the young person's learning and engagement (for example Bedson & Perkins 2006). However such contact is not always easy and the barriers raised in this study include young people wanting to keep their parents away from school and parents' lack of English.

One girl commented about her parents' contact with school 'I like them to stay away from my teachers'. She had trouble missing school and 'overreacting' to teachers, as well as difficulties at home, where there was parental violence and drug use.

One mother, whose daughter had been expelled, spoke of her mixed feelings about the school when the teacher said one thing and the girl another and she did not know whom to believe.

A number of the mothers spoke of their difficulty in communicating with the school because of their lack of English. These women, refugees from Vietnam and Laos, were no longer new arrivals, all having lived in Australia more than 15 years; but with large families and/or little formal education they had not been able to become proficient in English. As one mother commented, it was not that she felt unwelcome at the school, but because she didn't speak English she did not feel comfortable.

Improving school

We asked the 15 year olds whether anything would make school better for them. About half answered no, not really or that they did not know. Some were quite positive about school:

It's pretty good now, the subjects we have are great.

Everything's going well for me in school.

The improvements most frequently suggested were either around better control at school or about improved facilities, with a couple of comments about school starting too early and one complaint about too much homework and one boy wanting to be able to express his opinions.

There seemed to be a common theme about wanting better control at school. Suggestions included having more teachers on yard duty, teachers controlling the classes better, students talking less, not smoking in the toilets and having less bitchiness. For example:

I think more teachers on yard duty. Pretty much protect us, like having police in the public, I think the school grounds need more.

Extra facilities suggested included extra tutorials, art supplies, sport and air-conditioning.

Jack, who attended a senior college, commented:

They call it an adult learning environment, but there's no space for any growth really, you do what the book says and you can't argue against it. I'd like to see that changed because if you feel that something is not the way it should be you can try and change it if you want. Everyone's entitled to their own opinions I think. There's a student representative council and

it's full of I guess you'd call them the footy oafs and the Barbie girls, they dominate that and get all the popularity and then go round organising discos all year. What good's that?

What can schools do to help?

The 15 year olds gave us suggestions about what schools in general could do to best help young people their age. A common response was to assist with learning and planning for the future. Many emphasised help with education, some in very general terms, some more specific. They spoke of encouragement, help for those who are struggling, extra help with English (from NESB families), more interesting subjects and better teachers. Some wanted an introduction to modern society and were keen to learn about life more widely from their teachers, and some wanted work experience. Comments included:

Help us learn and sort out what we want to do in the future.

Maybe have teachers that have done what they teach about and you can learn from their mistakes as well.

The suggestions from two of the less engaged students both involved teachers listening:

(What can schools do best to help young people your age?) 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'.

Talk to 'em, listen to 'em. Ask them what they want to do in the future and then like help them out and tell them what they'll need to achieve to reach their goals or whatever. *(Do you reckon they should help with that earlier than they do?)* I reckon it's better just to ask every now and then because you always change your mind. Like when I was younger I wanted to be a lawyer. And I didn't even know what it was. But now I don't want to be that.

Life outside school

We asked the 15 year olds how their life outside school affected their schoolwork. The majority suggested that it had little effect, some because they had few outside activities ('Outside school I am quite a boring person'), others because they felt they could manage their late nights ('Going out too late, not enough sleep, it has no effect whatsoever'). Those working part time did not feel it 'really' affected their schoolwork, even though some were working quite long hours. But a few mentioned the impact of family life, particularly family conflict, on their schooling, and a few mentioned friends and their social life as a distraction.

Family factors

The young people's families provided a crucial context for their engagement with school. Families were a key source of security, support and encouragement, but also of stress and distress. Parents' ability to provide financial support and time for their children varied considerably among the low-income families.

The About Myself survey included questions about family life and well-being. These showed some changes since the young people were 11 and 12 year olds. Fewer now said they always or often got on well with their parents or had fun together as a family (see Appendix Table A2). Some felt their families were getting on better because of 'growing up'. In contrast, one girl talked of her increased anger:

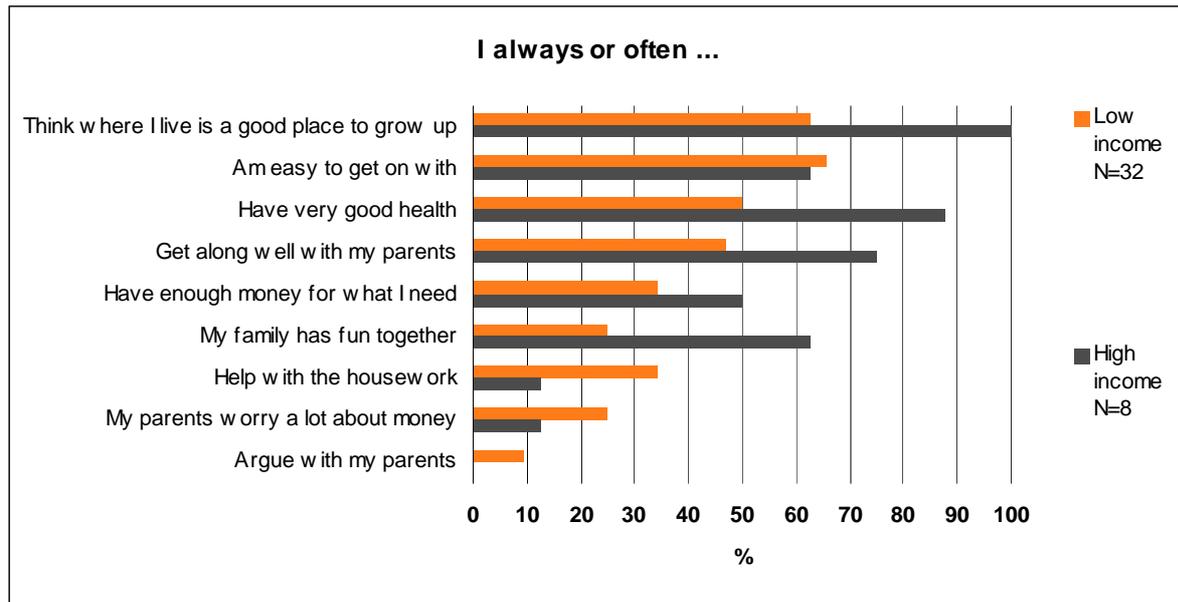
[Dad] will try to be strict but it doesn't work, he'll be like 'You can't go out' but I'll go anyway. I think I've changed—like my personality, like sometimes I get really angry.

Figure 5 shows that the 15 year olds on low incomes were less likely than those on high incomes to feel they were growing up in a good place, to get on well with their parents, to have fun together as a family or to feel that their health was good. They were more likely to help with housework and to feel their parents worried about money.

One girl in a low-income family wrote a number of explanations on her survey:

I don't wag because it's wrong. I don't have a boyfriend because I'm not allowed and I'm too young anyway. I always help with the housework because I hate when something isn't clean.

Figure 5 Family life: 15 year olds in low and high-income families



Family structure

At 15, over half of the young people in low-income families were living with both their natural parents. For some this was an important source of stability, but for a few their parents' conflict could be a source of distress. At least two young people had parents who were currently using illicit drugs. A few also mentioned conflict with siblings, in one case violence leading to a restraining order. A couple named their parents among hindrances to achieving their future plans.

Many of the low-income families were headed by sole parents or had been at an earlier stage of the study (some parents had reunited). Some young people were living with their mothers, others with their fathers as sole parents. Recent separations were often quite disturbing, but even separations long ago could result in challenging family relationships for the 15 year olds. Only one mentioned an advantage of having separated parents: getting two lots of pocket money. Some were hurt by the lack of contact with or interest from non-resident parents, for example visiting a father who had to ask what year level his child was in at school. Some would have preferred less contact with their non-resident parent, while others wanted more.

Some showed a sense of responsibility for their parents. For example, two 15 year olds spoke of wanting their mothers (sole parents) to have more social contact. One boy was pleased his mother was doing some training: 'It gives her a bit of interaction'. One girl would have liked her mother to make friends with the parents at school but she had little contact because of her limited English. The girl also wanted a part-time job—not for money for herself, but to contribute to the household:

She's a really good mum and she like takes care of us, she's practically been the father and the mother.

One girl spelled out the impact of family conflict on her school life:

Like if we have an argument, I can't really concentrate at school, cos I cry at school, I can't help myself ... it's happened like two or three times. (*About something that's happened at home?*) Yeah, it just comes out there during class. I just sit out the class.

Family demands—for example minding young siblings or running messages for parents—sometimes affected school attendance.

Parents' employment

We asked the young people how their parents' working (or not working) affected them. As mentioned above, 13 fathers and nine mothers in the 33 low-income families were in paid employment. About half of the 15 year olds felt their parents' work situation had little or no effect on them. Some explained that their parents were working reasonable hours or good shifts that meant they were at home when their children were. This clearly was important for some of them:

It doesn't affect me much because normally when I go to school, when I get home another hour after that they're home, so it's not like they come home at one in the morning and then leave at six or stuff like that. So we do get to see each other around dinner time.

[Referring to her sole parent] I like the way he's working now, because he's not doing night shift. He's doing day shift. So he's at work when I'm at school and he gets home a couple of hours after I get home.

Cos I'm at school when she works, so it's great. I come home and she's home, so it's like she didn't even go to work.

A couple of young people were quite positive about their parents' work, but more described the effects as negative. The 15 year olds who said their parents' working situation did affect them spoke of money (or lack of it), or not being able to see their parents due to long hours of work and shift work ('stupid hours') limiting family interaction and activities. Being able to have dinner together was important. They particularly mentioned being unable to see their father and many (8) said they thought their father was working too much, for example six days a week. Some commented on how tired their parents were. One boy had difficulty getting to his own part-time job when his father worked shift work. Their parents' work was also an influence for some who did not want to do the same kind of work.

Examples of their situations and comments about their mothers' work include:

I reckon Mum, at the end of the week, is absolutely buggered and I feel like 'oh you poor thing'. [Her mother works full-time, with Thursday and Sunday off.]

Well she's not here very often, but she's here to cook tea ... the only days she has off is Sundays and Tuesdays, and Tuesdays I'm at school. (Son of a sole parent)

She works part-time. I think for her it is quite difficult because she has to find a job that suits our school time and that she can pick us up and take us to school. For me, it doesn't really affect me but the fact that she doesn't earn a lot, that part has to do with me as well. (*Do you feel that there isn't much money coming into the family?*) Yeah. It limits what you can do and can't. (Daughter of a sole parent)

A major change for one family was that the mother had found a job. Both parents now worked full-time shift work, so money was less of a problem. The mother worked 3 pm to 1 am at a supermarket on a rotating shift. The parents and the children saw little of each other, as the 15 year old commented:

Mum works stupid hours, so has Dad lately, but that's all it really is, just dumb hours. Mum and Dad never see each other, cos usually Mum works night shift and if Mum works night shift Dad's either working night shift as well or if he's working day shift and then he'll sleep all night and he won't see her either. It's just their hours collide together and they never see each other and then Mum, we don't see her usually because she gets home around 2 o'clock [at night], and she'll want to sleep cos we get up early for school ... and then she's gone by the time we get back from school ... So we don't see much of anyone except for weekends, but sometimes they work weekends. So we just have to do our own thing really ... Mum's the worst, we don't get much time with Mum cos she works like those shifts every day.

One boy's father worked as a waiter and his hours meant the family seldom had activities together. The boy commented about his future: 'I want to work better, not as hard labour as them'.

One girl spoke of how her father (a sole parent) helped her to prepare to apply for a job and how his aspiration for her related to his own limited employment as a forklift driver:

It was when Dad had the day off work, and because he works all the time, he's always busy, he could only do it Friday. So I took the day off [school] and we went and did my resume and all that. And I got my tax file number and that.

Asked whether her father's work affected her career plans she responded:

Yeah kinda, ... cos he didn't go right through school and he said he would have wanted to do more with his life than what he's done now. Like he would have preferred to have done something that would pay more money, or done something that he would have been more proud of or something. So yeah.

One mother who was working during school hours worried about having to leave her children alone in school holidays.

A number of parents, mostly mothers, drove the children to school. This sometimes competed with the mother's employment. One mother drove her children because the buses were too expensive. One girl was usually getting driven to school but had problems when the car broke down. She also spoke of not wanting to wake her mother up to drive her because her mother worked late. Her report showed no absences but that she was often late to school.

Low family income

As mentioned above, the low-income families had all been on low incomes for the first 12 years of the young person's life and most remained on low incomes. For the six young people whose family income had increased above the low-income level, the advantages did not necessarily translate into high engagement with school: three of these young people had medium engagement, two low engagement and one had a development disability which meant he was not interviewed.

While their family incomes were low, many of the 15 year olds (23 of 33) said they thought their family had enough money for the family needs. Most also thought their families had enough money for their education costs. Only two said clearly their parents did not have enough money and another two said they sometimes had enough, while the remainder were unsure. The range of responses is illustrated by the following quotes:

Yeah, I reckon we're a normal family. We're not too rich, we don't have too little. Just in between. [His Vietnamese father works full time, and the family is now over the low-income level.]

No, we're getting benefits and from my grandpa. (*What doesn't your family have money for?*) Phone bills, electricity or whatever, we're pretty much scraping. [His sole parent was doing training.]

Usually [we have enough] but sometimes there might be a month, or maybe a week or two, that we are like struggling a lot. And then after some time it just comes back again. And also me and my sister eat a lot so it is really a big problem (*laughs*) and we have to buy a lot of snacks and food and it runs out really fast and in a week it's all gone. So that's really a thing my mum is worried about for money. [Her Vietnamese sole parent was working part time.]

The impact of the global economy on low-wage work in Australia was spelled out by one Vietnamese mother whose husband was a self-employed presser:

His job is to iron the garments sent to him by the local clothing manufacturer but now there are less garments for him to press as they are sent overseas to make at a cheaper labour rate.

Parental expectations and ethnic background

The parents who thought education was very important in spite of, or because of, their own limited schooling included both Australian-born and immigrant and refugee parents. Only one couple in the low-income group were university graduates and many parents had less than Year 11 themselves, while some had no formal education or only a few years of primary school.

One 15 year old in a Hmong refugee family commented about his community:

The oldies, the Hmong oldies they always go 'Oh yeah, do really good and become a doctor'. Like they've never had education before and they don't really understand it. All they say is 'doctor'—but not everyone can do that. Because education is hard too.

While all parents shared a view that education was important, there were additional issues for some of the refugee and immigrant families and their children, including cultural attitudes and the experience of racism. One mother from China expressed her main worry about her daughter at school was that 'her thought processes have been influenced by Western culture'.

Elma's father said his children attended a Turkish school so they did not have the pressure of being thought of as terrorists or different. He spoke of racism and an increased experience of being 'looked at' now they have moved to an outer suburb with more 'Anglo-Saxons', in contrast to multicultural inner suburbs. He did not take his wife who wore her head cover to the local shopping centre because 'they look at her'.

Several Australian-born 15 year olds from non-English speaking households worried that their English was still not good enough. For example, one said: 'My English is not really good for an Australian-born Chinese'.

However, some of these young people had great enjoyment from their family and community celebrations such as Chinese New Year, or Hmong community picnics.

Friends

Friends both in and out of school could be seen as either positive or negative influences. As mentioned above, good friendships were a highlight of school, while feeling left out or being bullied were negative experiences.

The multiethnic aspect of growing up in Melbourne was evident. A Turkish boy spoke of his Italian and Greek friends, a Hmong boy of his friends who were Australian and Kurdish. One 'Aussie' girl explained that the Muslim girls in her class did not do anything bad, just concentrated on school and home and religion, but they were not allowed out so she could not see them away from school.

Their friendships affected the 15 year olds' school engagement in various ways, from being a point of competition to do better to being a distraction from homework:

There's more of a mental push. I've got a lot of friends [in] my year level, so I want to do better than them.

When I'm out, like when I'm not at school, I don't really think, I just do what I want and I don't worry about concentrating or stuff like that. So it's different when you're at school and you have to concentrate and do the right thing and that ... Yeah sometimes I have homework and I bring it home and I end up doing something on the weekend and I forget about it. Like I never end up getting it done cos I'm always busy on the weekend.

I spend a bit of time on the internet, I talk on SMS [messaging] a bit and spend some time on that and it does sometimes interfere with my homework.

I was out a bit late sometimes and it started to catch up on me, got me a bit, that was probably another one of the reasons I was ditching school, I was a bit too tired and I didn't have the patience for teachers and that showed up. Mainly just during the year schoolwork was falling behind a bit.

One girl, who had been in trouble with the police, spoke of 'just hanging around with the wrong people'. She explained recent trouble:

I slept at [friend's] house and her Mum and everyone were asleep and we were just bored. We were just in our room listening to music and like 'Oh do you want to go for a walk?', like 'Yeah all right'. So we were just walking around the streets and I think it was Halloween night, we were gonna go trick-or-treating but I thought everyone would be asleep, it was like 12.30. And then we went down to the primary school and we climbed over the gate and we were just playing on the playground. And then we went to the gym and started smashing the windows and that and then we broke into there. And then we started playing with the fire extinguishers and cos where we smashed the windows we cut all our hands and that, blood was everywhere, and then we jumped over the fence and all cops came.

Some 15 year olds also mentioned that they had boyfriends or girlfriends, some within school and some outside. While few made reference to sexual activity or the possibility of parenthood, one boy was scathing about girls he knew, 'the stupid 16 year olds walking around with their prams'. And the girl who had already left school mentioned that having children might stop her future work plans. (Her refugee mother had had a large family at an early age.)

Employment

The employment situation of the 15 year olds in low-income families was as follows:

- at school only 17
- at school and with paid work 10
- at school and actively looking for work 4
- left school and working (part-time) 1
- left school and not working 1

The 15 year olds' part-time jobs were mostly in fast-food shops (5), with others in retail, a bakery, as a kitchen hand in an aged care facility, as a self-employed DJ and two in parents' shops. Some worked quite long hours. Several were actively looking for work and were acquiring tax file numbers and writing resumes with this in mind. A few had made unsuccessful attempts at getting jobs. For others paid employment was part of a more distant future. Some parents were encouraging their children to get jobs, for the experience and or for the money. However one father worried that his daughter might leave school if she got a paying job.

Most did not see their part-time jobs as their careers:

Work's just a part-time job after school for money basically, it's not my career anyway.

This girl earned over \$100 a week at a bakery, working 10 or 11 hours per week, usually after school and all day Saturday. She just went in and applied for the job. For a while she also worked at a fast food café as well, but 'they kept colliding'. She liked working with her friends, but had 'the worst boss in the world'. Another girl described her work earning \$6 an hour in a chicken takeaway shop where 'you come home everyday smelling of oil'; so she would prefer a job at a chemist.

The part-time workers were pleased to have the money and at least two (both girls) were saving for cars in the future. Some saw themselves as contributing to the household.

The students with part-time jobs did not see these as interfering with their studies:

It depends. When it's the end of school we get a lot of schoolwork and work is time off from schoolwork, but I usually get it all finished. But sometimes work helps me not to think about school.

I don't think mine really does, it doesn't affect me at all I don't think. (*Homework and hours of part-time work?*) Yeah that's hard. Well I don't really get homework, but when I do I'm usually up late and get a little bit tired but then I'm over it at school and I'm good for the day. (*Will it get more difficult when you get older and have more homework?*) Yeah I'll just have to space it out more. [Her report noted 'lack of effort on homework' for maths.]

I've chosen my [work] hours smartly. I've given myself two hours each night for homework.

A few who had tried unsuccessfully to get jobs had suffered a bit from the rejection and were not continuing to try.

The future: lifelong learning

The 15 year olds were asked about lifelong learning, continuing learning after they left school, and whether this was important to them. Two-thirds of those in the 33 low-income families thought lifelong learning was important, seven said it was not and three did not know.

Several who were enthusiastic about lifelong learning made comments like 'You learn something new everyday' and that they enjoyed learning new things. Some wanted to learn 'hands on' (as from work experience) and some specified what they would like to learn more about: mechanics, computers, the law, relationships, different cultures, banking and financial management, babies and child development.

One commented about the importance of lifelong learning:

Yeah I really think so, some things you really have to learn by experiencing and school won't teach you, like the way you handle things between people in relationships and the way you treat others, that really needs experience and social life and stuff. And some things people can't teach you, you really need to understand it yourself.

Those who did not think lifelong learning was for them included both girls and boys (4 with Australian-born parents, 3 of non-English speaking background). They made comments such as:

Not really, I don't know. I'll stop learning after I get a job.

No, once you've got the job and you know how to do it and that's the job you want to keep doing, I don't think you have to [keep learning].

Comparisons with the 15 year olds in high-income families

The eight 15 year olds who had grown up in high-income families provide a point of comparison with those who grew up on low incomes, who have been described above. The small numbers limit the conclusions that can be drawn, but nonetheless illustrate the similarities and differences of young people's experiences.

The 15 year olds from high-income families had rather different responses about what was important in their lives from those on low incomes. Most emphasised their sporting activities (rowing, tennis, basketball and karate) and two talked of the term each had spent at their (non-government) schools' rural campuses. Interestingly none of them named education as one of the most important things in their current lives, although this was the most frequent response for the low-income 15 year olds. Perhaps it was taken for granted. They identified family and friends as important, as did those on low incomes. Two mentioned the impact of their parents' separation.

Comments about what was important to them included:

My family, my friends, especially the ones I still keep in touch with from primary school. Tennis is a very big part of my life.

I do quite a lot of out-of-school activities. So sometimes they get a bit overwhelming with homework and stuff but I manage to keep on top of it.

Like their low-income peers, when asked specifically about school, all those in high-income families said their parents thought that school was important as they did themselves, while most thought most of their friends also saw school as important.

School factors

The young people from the high-income families were more likely to be highly engaged with school than were those on low incomes, although both groups' enthusiasm for school had fallen somewhat since Year 6 (see Figure 4 on page 14). Six of the eight were at non-government schools. Half the high-income young people always or often looked forward to school, half only 'sometimes'. More than half described themselves as doing better overall than most of their class and their achievement was clearly reflected in their school reports.

One boy, however, had ongoing learning difficulties and some disengagement with school. He sometimes did not look forward to school and stayed away about a day a week. His mother described this as due to illness and disenchantment. He explained his absences as being tired after basketball.

The young people in high-income families mostly reported getting on well with their teachers, although some mentioned not getting on with particular teachers. One girl commented that some of her teachers had 'been teaching too long and really dislike it obviously'.

Missing out on activities was not a matter of cost for these young people, but rather a matter of competing priorities, for example having to choose between ballet and interschool sports. Most were involved in a variety of school and out-of-school activities, although one mother noted her daughter was not interested in extracurricular activities and one boy, with a number of outside activities, said he was not involved in extra activities at school: 'School is just school. It shouldn't be something you get so involved in'.

Sporting activities such as rowing sometimes interfered with homework:

Rowing is the biggest clash. I get so tired, rowing at 5.30 in the morning, I get home at 2 o'clock and collapse. I'm sometimes like a zombie doing my homework. I'm not forced to do it—my mum is always saying 'Why don't you drop rowing or drop athletics this

year?’—but it’s all right. My sports are social, it’s not serious. My brother gave up everything in Year 11 and 12 but just ended up going out all the time.

Well I’d say sometimes I overdo stuff and don’t really allow time for my homework. Although I’d say I still manage my time fairly well. And ... a lot of the time I plan *around* things that I’m doing. So usually Mum and Dad let me know in advance if we’re having friends over or stuff like that, if we’re going out, or if we’re going away.

All said they had a good group of friends at school and friends were clearly an important part of school, with lunchtime a favourite time as for the low-income group. There were also issues with friends. One boy sometimes felt left out, one girl discussed past bullying in her year level: ‘I think a lot of people have grown up in the last year’.

What did their schools do to make students feel they belong? Responses were similar to the low-income young people in terms of peer sessions, cross-age activities and preventing bullying. A couple mentioned house activities as important:

Our school has six houses and the house spirit is really strong. Once a week in our house groups we sit down for an hour, so we’re with people from different year levels. It’s pretty cool.

All said they felt that they belonged to the school, although one qualified this: ‘In an odd way, yes I feel I belong’. One boy outlined his strong sense of belonging in terms of contributing to the school:

Being part of the rowing program I get a lot of emphasis, there’s a lot of prestige about it. So I feel part of [school] and it’s good because the teachers respect me. And I get a good feeling that I am wanted, to be there ... which is good. I’m not just a passer-by, I’m more of a contributor to the school which makes me feel a lot more a part of it.

Family factors

The 15 year olds in the high-income families were more likely than their low-income peers to say that where they live was a good place to grow up, that they always or often get on well with their parents and that their family had fun together (see Figure 5 on page 30). Their lists of family activities were generally much more extensive than the other young people’s. However they were less likely than those in low-income families to help regularly with housework.

Three sets of high-income parents had separated, one when their child was in primary school, two more recently. The 15 year olds in these families all spent regular time in both parents’ houses. For some this gave an element of choice when there were tensions:

My parents split up—I had to go through the whole moving house thing. This happened when I was 13 or 12 years old. That’s been the most important thing to happen in my life. I do half and half with my mum and dad—two weeks at each house. It’s not that bad, I guess. Just packing my clothes up all the time gets a bit on my nerves ... It’s really OK; friends find it hard to contact you though. It can be confusing.

All fathers and mothers in the high-income families were in paid employment. Like the low-income young people, some high-income 15 year olds felt their parents’ work had little or no effect on them, while others felt the effects. They were more likely to say their mothers’ work affected them than their fathers’ work, generally not seeing as much of their mothers as they would like and feeling that their mothers worked too hard. In some cases they just accepted that fathers work long hours (‘It’s just usual I think’), in others the fathers were more available than the mothers. Comments included:

She still works a lot. There’s big periods where I don’t see her ... So on Saturdays which I spend here she’s usually gone before I get up and she won’t be home until about three ...

I wish I could spend more time with her, but she works ... Whether or not it's a good thing I don't know—it's what she wants to do, so that's fair enough.

It's fine. The only problem is transport when they're working.

Their parents' work did not greatly influence their future plans, although one boy knew he did not want to work as hard and long as his mother and preferred his father's 'laid-back' approach, and one girl knew she did not want to be a doctor like her parents: 'I have a thing against blood'.

The high-income young people all felt their parents had enough money for the family's needs and for their education costs, although one thought her parents worried a lot about money. One noted she was on a scholarship, but that even without it they would be 'OK'. Another commented:

Anything to do with school is no problem, if I want to go on one of the exchange trips overseas, it's not an issue, he's happy to put the money in.

While they knew their parents valued education and generally wanted them to go to university, there were varying approaches from parents. One boy was very aware his father had been the first in his family to go to university and was very interested in his children's schooling. Some said that their parents encouraged them but would not be worried if they did not get high scores 'as long as I was trying'.

Employment

Half the eight 15 year olds in high-income families had some form of paid work. A couple worked in family businesses, as did a few in low-income families; one was working as a waitress, and one young entrepreneur was selling soft drinks illicitly at school. Another had stopped working as it did not fit with sport and study. Some were thinking about a part-time or holiday job. One had written her resume that day:

I really should get a job before I go to France next year. I really need some money but I haven't got around to that.

Seven of the high-income 15 year olds thought lifelong learning was important to them, and one was unsure. They would like to learn more about 'the world and stuff':

I think mainly I'd kind of like to get a broader perspective on everything, and like to learn about the whole world, learn more about other countries and cultures and things like that.

Their future career plans tended to be fluid. One who wanted to work for NASA last year was now thinking about being a lawyer; one was interested in being a doctor but 'it changes pretty regularly'. One, who said he had no idea what he wanted to do, added that he was not interested in becoming a doctor or lawyer:

Just being rich or owning fancy cars or a big house, just doesn't appeal to me.

In brief, there were some shared attitudes and experiences among the young people from high and low-income families, but there were some important differences in their range of opportunities.

Discussion

Changes and transitions

The longitudinal nature of the Life Chances Study allows exploration of the changes in the families over time and highlights the diversity of these changes. Since the last interviews when the young people were 11 and 12 year olds, some of the low-income families have become more secure (reflecting increased employment in an era of relative prosperity and older children needing less child care and perhaps working) while for others the financial struggle has increased (with higher costs, long-term unemployment, health problems and low wages). At an individual level some young people have ‘grown up’ and become easier to live with for their parents, others have become more actively rebellious in seeking independence.

In terms of transition from school to work, one 15 year old had made a seemingly unplanned transition from school to part-time work and another from school to some ad hoc training. However for more of the young people, their key transition was into part-time work alongside school attendance. They were going through the necessary rites of passage of getting tax file numbers and writing resumes, and learning about the successes and failures in applying for jobs, about awful bosses, customer service and about balancing paid work with the rest of their life.

School engagement

As a group, the 15 year olds were less engaged with school than they were as 11 and 12 year olds; and the low-income group were less engaged than those from high-income families, although with much individual variation. This relative lack of engagement of young people from low-income families at the end of compulsory schooling has major implications for their future education and employment.

The literature on school engagement identifies behavioural, emotional and cognitive aspects of school engagement. These aspects interact in important ways, but are considered separately below.

Behavioural engagement with school has been defined in terms of attendance or absenteeism and also of participation in school activities. Five case studies of those who had left school or had considerable absenteeism were introduced in this study (see pages 15 to 19). These 15 year olds were all from families who had been persistently on low incomes and most were from sole parent families; but the parents also had other disadvantages ranging from lack of English and limited education to drug or alcohol dependence. The five young people themselves were generally not high academic achievers, although there were exceptions. However some of the highly engaged 15 year olds from low-income families had similar disadvantage in their family backgrounds. Individual characteristics such as temperament seem relevant in seeking explanations.

School factors involved with behavioural engagement included control of bullying, discipline culture in relation to absenteeism and other transgressions, and assistance for those who missed school.

Participation in activities such as sport and drama was an important aspect of their enjoyment of school for many of the 15 year olds, although others chose not to participate. Conversely, missing out on school camps and excursions was an issue for some 15 year olds, with the cost of these a major barrier, though sometimes a hidden one.

Emotional engagement with school (a sense of belonging and value) was indicated in the young people’s responses to questions about looking forward to school, and getting on well with their teachers. Having a good group of friends at school was an important part of their enjoyment of school, with lunchtime often a highlight. Some 15 year olds from low-income families spoke very

enthusiastically about school, while others were less keen. Overall they were less likely to look forward to school than they had been when aged 11 and 12. Half the 15 year olds from high-income families looked forward to school always or often, compared with less than half of those from low-income families.

Cognitive engagement with school (a belief that school is ‘for me’) seemed to be generally very high: all the 15 year olds stated that school and education was important for them and all said that their parents also thought so. How much education was essential was a more complex and contested question. For many, education was a means to an end and there was a stated expectation that a good education would lead to a good job. Some, but not all, expressed their enjoyment of learning for its own sake. Some had a positive attitude to lifelong learning, while others felt their education should be complete once they had acquired career qualifications. Some of the 15 year olds with limited emotional and behavioural engagement in school could still say school was important for them. It seemed that this had an element of lip service about it, but perhaps while understanding that school was important to them they were very aware of the other factors impinging on their attendance and sense of belonging.

Influences on engagement with school

School factors

The interviews with the 15 year olds showed the factors that were important in their engagement with school included their contact with their friends, having teachers who they felt they got on well with, subjects and activities they enjoyed, as well as a belief that school was important for their future. Getting good marks was a source of pride for the young people who achieved this.

Influences on their disengagement included school factors such as not being able to do the work, being bored, feeling left out, not listened to or discriminated against.

How young people from disadvantaged backgrounds tackled learning seemed to link to temperament and/or to their relationship with their teachers. Some who had difficulty understanding a subject would decide they did not like the subject and therefore not try. Others talked of working with their teacher to understand the subject better.

The study confirms the complexity of relationships between academic achievement and school engagement presented by Willms’ cluster analysis of the PISA study (2003): students who achieve well have varying degrees of engagement and highly engaged students have varying levels of achievement. His identification of five groups of students (top students, engaged students, isolated students, absentee students and non-academic students) outlined in the introduction provides a potentially useful framework for considering engagement strategies for different students.

Some of the young people were very enthusiastic about the special programs they had taken part in at school and these fostered their engagement. Examples included city campus program for outer suburban and country schools and leadership programs.

The 15 year olds in our study included both Year 9 and Year 10 students, two groups which educators often see as presenting rather different challenges and for which some schools offer different programs. Some of the young people in high-income families were attending non-government schools which provided a Year 9 term away from school at a rural location. These had been highlights for those who attended.

Family influences

Family factors influencing the 15 year olds’ school engagement included the disruption of family separations, including changing between parental households, especially when it meant changing

schools. Distress about family conflict could prevent students concentrating at school. In some families, having to provide child care or interpreting could take the 15 year old away from school.

The case studies illustrate the large-scale findings of the PISA study (Willms 2003) of lower rates of school engagement (in terms of a sense of belonging and of attendance) for those in low socioeconomic status families and for those in sole parent families, and with a mixed picture for those from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Parental employment is often seen as a key to raising low-income families out of poverty, and also by some commentators as a good 'model' for children to avoid intergenerational unemployment. For these 15 year olds from low-income families, however, their parents' employment was a mixed blessing. The income was generally appreciated and work was seen as a positive in a 9-to-5 timeframe. However the young people were concerned about the shift work and fatigue of parents and the way that family activities, even family dinners, were curtailed, not to mention the opportunity for discussion of the 15 year old's future plans. The effect of some parents' work was that the young did not want jobs like these. For some this would encourage engagement with school to get further education and a 'good job', for others this was less clear. Interestingly, the 15 year olds in low-income families were more worried about their fathers working too much, those in high-income families about their mothers.

The young people's reservations about the effects of their parents' work raise questions about the current Welfare to Work policies which put considerable pressure on disadvantaged parents to take whatever work is offered.

Low family income, as mentioned above, was an important barrier to some of the 15 year olds' participation in school activities, although a barrier that was sometimes hidden by the young people within a mix of other reasons for not participating. More parents than 15 year olds spoke of what their children were missing out on and also of their struggles to meet basic costs such as uniforms, books and subject fees as well as 'extras' such as camps and excursions. However the effect of missing out on the extras was spelled out by Tom who, having missed camp because of cost, received poor marks for the subsequent assignment associated with the camp.

High family income enabled some young people in the study to participate in an extensive range of activities and most of them took up these opportunities. It did not, however, protect some from the pain of parental separations, the stress of conflicts with friends and uncertainty about their futures.

Leaving home was a major factor in disengagement from school for two of the 15 year olds, one moving interstate to live with relatives, the other 'running away from home'. While not homeless at the time of interview, at least one was at risk of becoming so. Homelessness of course presents an extreme barrier for young people who want to continue their education (Morris & Blaskett 1992). (However planned times away from home, for example the terms at country campuses for some non-government schools, are not considered a problem for school engagement.)

Work and friends

Work was becoming an increasing part of the 15 year olds' lives: 14 of those at school (39) had part-time jobs and others were seeking work. Those working generally saw their part-time jobs as a source of immediate income and of future savings, rather than as part of a career. They did not feel that their jobs interfered with their schoolwork, although at least one school report suggested a lack of attention to homework. Friends, rather than work, were seen by the 15 year olds as the main distraction from homework. These outside factors will become more critical as the young people move on to the greater demands of Years 11 and 12.

Gender

While gender is a key aspect of the 15 year olds' identity and other studies show it to be a significant in young people's educational pathways and early school leaving (for example Teese & Polesel 2003), in this small-scale study we found both girls and boys among the least engaged with school and among the most engaged.

Cycles of school engagement

The interaction of various aspects of school experience and school engagement seems key in understanding both the outcomes for young people and in considering policy and practice.

The economic concepts of the virtuous cycle (or circle) and the vicious cycle can be borrowed with some relevance when considering education, not only at the societal level (Banks 2005) but also at the individual level. School engagement can be seen as a complex process with many feedback mechanisms. A vicious cycle leading to school disengagement can be seen in the way missing school may lead to not understanding the work, to conflict with teachers and in turn to missing more school. Other aspects that feed into such cycles can include conflict with peers and feeling left out leading to absenteeism. One of the young people (Nicole) illustrated the feedback of running away from home, missing school, being behind in work, failing exams, and possibly having to repeat the year which she says would be reason enough to leave school altogether. Being unable to afford school costs can be another factor in the cycle of disengagement.

Policy implications

Previous major studies of social engagement have highlighted the need for schools to address issues of school engagement and that schools can make a difference (Fullarton 2002; Willms 2003). Although many aspects of early school leaving and lack of engagement with school can be related to factors of family background (such as limited parental education or sole parent families and low family income), it is not these but the school-based factors which may be more possible to change. Fullarton (2002) points to the policy implications of the importance of the school climate for student engagement and the equity issues of access to extracurricular activities. She notes that while educational research often identifies factors influencing student outcomes that are not readily amenable to change, the promotion of extracurricular activities is something that can be changed within schools. High engagement in school-based activities may keep students who are low academic achievers attached to school and enable them to complete school. Extracurricular activities may also encourage students' interest in lifelong learning.

Willms (2003) concludes from the PISA study that accommodating diversity is a central challenge for educators and policy makers. He notes that policies and practices that lead to higher levels of student engagement include sensitivity to the higher rates of disaffection of students from low SES, foreign-born and sole parent families. Schools may need diverse programs to meet the needs of different groups of disaffected students.

What can schools do?

This report is based on the experiences of a group of 15 year olds, and to some extent of their parents, but has not involved a direct study of the schools they attend and the schools' policies and practices. Given this limitation, some general issues are raised below about what schools can do to increase their students' engagement. Other studies which are school-based provide best practice frameworks for working with at risk students (see for example, Cole 2004).

The PISA study (Willms 2003) showed schools had higher student engagement where there was a strong disciplinary climate, a high expectation of success and good student-teacher relations. The feedback from the 15 year olds in this study supports this. When the low-income group was asked what would improve school for them the strongest theme among their responses was about wanting better control from teachers, both in class and in the school yard. We suggest that for the first two

elements (disciplinary climate and high expectations) to promote school engagement, the third, good student–teacher relations, must also be present. Strong school control is about ensuring students feel safe in the schoolground and have space in the schoolroom to be heard as well as to listen. It is not about discipline for minor issues, such as Jack’s example about students who have been kicked out of home being suspended from school for lack of the correct uniform.

Fredricks et al. (2004) also highlight findings of good relations with teachers being associated with greater cognitive engagement with school and lower drop-out rates. There is a clear message from the present study, spelled out by two of the most disengaged students, about the importance of teachers listening to the young people.

The 15 year olds also identified the importance of assistance from schools with their learning and with their future planning. They emphasised the need for additional help for those who were struggling at school. A notable aspect of the study was that a number of these Australian-born young people who had done all their schooling in Australia, but were from non English-speaking families, were worried that their English language skills were not good enough. This seems an indictment of the education system they had been in for so many years.

The 15 year olds we spoke to were keen that schools helped them work out their future plans, but they were very aware that they frequently changed their own ideas about such plans. They were generally very appreciative of school career advice and well-constructed work experience programs.

If schools are to engage and include students, the following issues seem to be priorities:

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

Wider policy issues

The findings about this small group of 15 year olds remind us of much wider policy concerns for the well-being of young people and their families. These include the need for adequate family incomes, both adequate wages and adequate income support payments, which are under some threat from the recent industrial relations reforms and from the Welfare to Work policies which reduce financial support to sole parents in need and those with disabilities. The importance of access to secure and affordable housing is highlighted by the number of school changes for some of the disadvantaged young people associated with their families having to move house. Even clearer is the need for education policies that ensure that school education is inclusive and affordable. The increasing costs of university education will be a matter of concern for the 15 year olds in the immediate future and for many others in the wider community.

Policy priorities for 15 years olds such as those in our study include:

- providing non-academic career options, as well as flexible pathways back into education and training for those who have left
- addressing costs as a potential barrier to post-compulsory education, including school, TAFE and university.

Conclusions

Young people's positive engagement with school, in terms of 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 and also for their future completion of school, further education and employment opportunities, and transition into adulthood.

This report presents the experiences of some 40 young people, most of whom have grown up in low-income families, and all of whom have been part of the longitudinal Life Chances Study since birth. As a group, they were less engaged with school at 15 than they had been in earlier years; as individuals, some were highly engaged and others were not. Their experiences and the wider literature on school engagement highlight some key issues in promoting young people's school engagement and preventing their exclusion from their schools and further educational opportunities. These issues involve both promoting a school climate of inclusion and avoiding cycles of disengagement.

The 15 year olds' plans for their future education and employment are the subject of a separate report (Nelms & Taylor, in preparation). We plan to follow up all the young people in the Life Chances Study as 16 and 17 year olds to explore how their engagement with school and their future plans evolve.

Appendix

Method – data collection

1. A letter was sent to parents saying we would like to visit the family to talk to the parents and to the 15 year olds about how they were getting on at school (or elsewhere) and plans for the future. Parents were asked to let us know if they no longer want to be involved in the study. They were asked to pass on a letter to their child explaining the study and seeking consent.

2. A phone call was made to arrange a time with parent and child – the interviewer spoke to the young people to explain the study and get verbal consent.

3. In most cases the interviewer visited the family (after school or at a weekend). This involved:

- Short interview with parent (usually mother) to complete a questionnaire
- Meanwhile young person completed the About Myself survey
- Interview with young person (30 minutes plus) (tape-recorded)

Considerable thought was given to the age of the interviewers. Some new younger interviewers including one Cantonese speaker were recruited to the study as being likely to engage with the young people. Some older interviewers who had undertaken the interviews in past stages were also used giving continuity for both parents and young people. In some cases, parents who spoke Cantonese or Vietnamese were interviewed by phone by the bilingual interviewer who had interviewed them in earlier stages. A Hmong interpreter who had been involved in earlier stages was also employed.

As part of the planning, two informal group discussions were held with young people in the Fitzroy area (through the BSL Homework program and Fitzroy Learning Network) about relevant issues and questions for the study.

Family income

Family income was assessed for each family in the study and then categorised as low income, medium income or high income. The cut-off point for each income level is given below.

Table A1 Family income levels Life Chances Study stage 7

<i>Income levels</i>	Low income <i>Level 1</i>		Medium income <i>Level 2</i>	High income <i>Level 3</i>
	<i>Below Henderson PovertyLine 1996 plus 20%, updated by CPI</i>		<i>Between level 1 and 3</i>	<i>Above 1996 Family Payment cut-off, updated by CPI</i>
Income unit	\$/wk (net)	\$/yr (net)		\$/yr (gross)
<i>Head in the labour force</i>	BELOW			ABOVE
Couple with 1 child	565	29394		80670
Couple with 2 children	660	34335		84704
Couple with 3 children	755	39274		88738
Couple with 4 children	850	44216		92773
Couple with 5 children	941	48974		96807
Couple with 6 children	1033	53733		100841
Couple with 7 children	1124	58492		104876
Single parent with 1 child	451	23468		80670
Single parent with 2 children	546	28404		84704
Single parent with 3 children	641	33345		88738
Single parent with 4 children	736	38286		92773
Single parent with 5 children	827	43045		96807
<i>Head not in the labour force</i>				
Couple with 1 child	498	25936		80670
Couple with 2 children	593	30877		84704
Couple with 3 children	688	35818		88738
Couple with 4 children	783	40758		92773
Couple with 5 children	875	45517		96807
Single parent with 1 child	384	20007		80670
Single parent with 2 children	479	24948		84704
Single parent with 3 children	574	29888		88738
Single parent with 4 children	669	34829		92773
Single parent with 5 children	761	39588		96807

Note: Income levels used for stage 6 in 2002 have been adjusted by CPI increase of 10.2% (March 2002 to December 2005)

Updating income levels

The issues of poverty lines and how they are updated are problematic in general and for longitudinal studies in particular. The low-income line used since the start of the Life Chances Study in 1990 has been 120 per cent of the Henderson Poverty Line, the level that Professor Henderson defined as including both the poor and the very poor. In the first stages of the study, the line was updated using the Melbourne Institute method. In stage 6, this method was used, and also an update using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) increase (Taylor & Fraser 2003, p.192). For stage 7, we have chosen to use the CPI increase (calculated as 14.8% from March 1996 to March 2002, and 10.2% from March 2002 to December 2005) to adjust the income cut-off levels for both the low-income and the high-income group.

The low-income levels are based on 120 per cent of the Henderson Poverty Line as at 1996 (stage 5) updated by the CPI in 2002 (stage 6) and in 2005 (stage 7). The high-income level was based on the 1996 cut-off level for eligibility for Family Payment, also updated by the CPI in 2002 and 2005.

About Myself

Table A2 About Myself responses – stage 7 (age 15) compared with stage 6 (age 11/12)

	age 11/12 N=39	age 15 N=39
<i>I always or often ...</i>		
Have a good group of friends at school	31	35
Think where I live is a good place to grow up	30	27
Enjoy playing sport	29	26
Am easy to get on with	24	26
Use a computer at home	16	25
Enjoy learning new things	NA	24
Have very good health	20	22
Get on well with my teachers	29	22
Get along well with my parents	29	21
Do my homework on time	30	19
Use the computer at school	24	19
Look forward to going to school	28	17
Have enough money for what I need	16	15
My family has fun together	25	13
Enjoy reading books	24	12
Help with the housework	13	11
I have a boyfriend/girlfriend	NA	10
My parents worry a lot about money	5	9
Smoke	NA	4
Drink alcohol	NA	4
Argue with my parents	3	3
Feel left out at school	1	2
Wag school	NA	2
Use marijuana or other drugs	NA	1
Feel sad or unhappy	2	1
Fight with other kids	1	1
Have been in trouble with the police	NA	0

Notes:

NA = not applicable. These questions were not asked at stage 6.

While there were 41 young people in stage 7 of the study, one was unable to complete 'About Myself' because of development delay and another had not completed it at age 11, leaving 39 (comprising 31 from low-income and 8 from high-income families) who had completed it at both stages and are compared here.

Table A3 About Myself responses – stage 7 (age 15) by family income group

	Low income N=32	High income N=8	Total N=40
<i>I always or often ...</i>			
Have a good group of friends at school	27	8	35
Think where I live is a good place to grow up	20	8	28
Enjoy playing sport	20	7	27
Am easy to get on with	21	5	26
Use a computer at home	19	6	25
Enjoy learning new things	17	7	24
Have very good health	16	7	23
Get on well with my teachers	16	7	23
Get along well with my parents	15	6	21
Do my homework on time	14	5	19
Use the computer at school	12	7	19
Look forward to going to school	13	4	17
Have enough money for what I need	11	4	15
My family has fun together	8	5	13
Enjoy reading books	7	6	13
Help with the housework	11	1	12
I have a boyfriend/girlfriend	8	2	10
My parents worry a lot about money	8	1	9
Smoke	4	0	4
Drink alcohol	4	0	4
Argue with my parents	3	0	3
Feel left out at school	2	0	2
Wag school	2	0	2
Use marijuana or other drugs	1	0	1
Feel sad or unhappy	1	0	1
Fight with other kids	1	0	1
Have been in trouble with the police	0	0	0

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