

School experiences of 15 and 16 year-olds

Introduction

School plays an important role in young people's lives. Students who have positive experiences at school are more likely to be academically successful at school and develop positive attitudes toward learning throughout their lifetimes. Positive attitudes and perceptions, in turn, play a significant role in influencing students' intentions to complete school and pursue post-school education and training (Khou & Ainley, 2005). Students who feel more engaged with their secondary schools tend to participate more in school-organised extracurricular activities and other activities in their communities.

In 2003, a nationally representative sample of approximately 12 500 15 year-old students was selected to participate in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).¹ More than 10 000 of these young people became the third cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). The PISA sample was constructed by randomly selecting fifty 15 year-old

students per school from a sample of schools designed to represent each Australian State and school sector (government, Catholic and other non-government schools). Assessments in mathematical literacy, reading literacy, scientific literacy and problem solving were administered to students in their schools as part of PISA, and students completed questionnaires about their families, their attitudes to school, their participation in school activities and their use of computers.

In follow-up telephone interviews in 2003 as part of LSAY, students provided further information on their schools and part-time work. In 2004, members of this cohort were contacted again for telephone interviews for LSAY. At this time, most members of the cohort were in Year 11 at school. As part of the PISA student questionnaires in 2003 and the LSAY telephone interviews in 2003 and 2004, cohort members provided information on their experiences at school and their attitudes toward school.

This *Briefing* provides a summary of students' experiences at school and their attitudes and perceptions of these experiences at ages 15 and 16. It is based on information obtained

¹ Details on Australia's participation in PISA 2003 are provided by Thomson, Cresswell & De Bortoli (2004).

LSAY Briefings is a series produced by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), drawing on data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), a research program managed jointly by ACER and the

Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training. The aims of the series are to bring summaries of findings from LSAY research to a wider audience and to examine particular topics in brief. Related references, are listed at the end of the paper.

Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth BRIEFING

HIGHLIGHTS

- 15 and 16 year-olds have strong positive attitudes about their schools: 94% said that they felt happy, safe and secure at school
- Students generally reported positive relationships with their teachers: 87% felt that teachers would give them extra help if needed
- Students rate their teachers highly in their subject knowledge, but admit it can be difficult sometimes for teachers to maintain students' interest
- Three out of ten students enrolled in a VET in Schools subject as part of their Year 11 studies, and the majority of these students had some workplace learning as part of their VET studies
- Six out of ten 15 and 16 year-olds plan to study at university after leaving school
- More than one-half of 15 and 16 year-olds work part time while at school, with over 50% working more than 10 hours per week

Table 1 Distribution of 2003 LSAY cohort members at school, by gender and year level

	2003			2004		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
Year level	%	%	%	%	%	%
Year 9 or below	11	7	9	<1	<1	<1
Year 10	71	73	72	9	6	8
Year 11	18	20	19	60	63	62
Year 12	<1	<1	<1	17	18	17
Not at school	%	%	%	%	%	%
University				<1	<1	<1
VET				6	3	4
Not studying				8	9	8
Number in sample	5276	5094	10370	4781	4597	9378

in both years from these young people who participated in PISA in 2003 and are now part of the LSAY 2003 cohort. Table 1 shows the distribution, by year level, of the cohort in both 2003 and 2004.

School satisfaction

More than one-half of students (55%) attended their school because it was the local school for those living in the area, and more than one-half (52%) said that their school was known to be a better school than others in the area. For 39 per cent of students, family tradition was an

important influence in their choice of school.

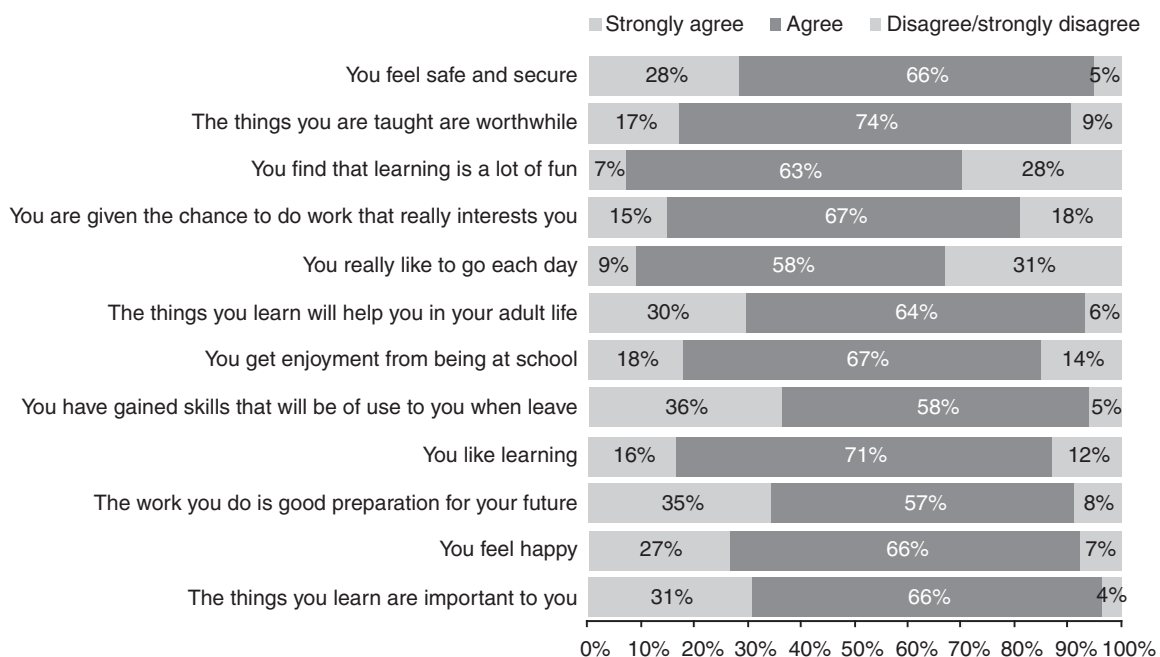
Students held positive attitudes toward their school environment and reported satisfaction with their school. Over 90 per cent of students responded that school was a place where they felt happy, safe and secure (see Figure 1). Sixty-nine per cent of girls and 63 per cent of boys said that their school was a place they really liked to go each day.

Students said they liked to learn (88%), saw learning as a lot of fun (70%) and enjoyed doing work that interests them (82%). Overall, 15 year-olds strongly believed that

the things they learn at school are important to them (97%), the things they are taught are worthwhile (91%), the work they did was good preparation for their future (92%), and the things they were learning would help them in their adult life (94%).

A positive attitude toward school was also reflected in students' arrival at school each day. Sixty-four per cent of students said that they did not arrive late for school (66% of boys and 62% of girls), while 10 per cent were late more than three times in the two weeks prior to the survey.

Figure 1 Percentage distribution of how students feel about school



Getting along with others

Most students had positive attitudes about their schools, with 88 per cent strongly stating that they felt they belonged there. Ninety-five per cent of students felt that other students liked them, while 91 per cent felt they made friends easily at school. Overall, 93 per cent of students reported that they felt happy at school. In contrast, 7 per cent of students indicated that they felt like an outsider or were left out of things, and 6 per cent of students felt lonely at school.

Getting along with teachers

Most students said that they were getting along well with most teachers, and 87 per cent indicated that if they needed extra help, they would receive it from their teachers (see Figure 2). Most students also said that teachers were interested in their students' well-being (82% indicated 'strongly agree' or 'agree') and that most of their teachers treated them fairly (87%).

Overall, students held positive attitudes toward their teachers' skills

in their subject areas. Over 85 per cent of students felt their teachers knew their subject matter well and that they were well prepared and organised. In addition, over 75 per cent of students believed teachers explained things clearly and demonstrated an ability to communicate well with students. Nevertheless, only 59 per cent of students felt their teachers maintained students' interest in their subjects.

Students' perceptions of their academic progress

Most students believed that they and their peers had positive experiences in the classroom. Eighty-three per cent of students agreed that students were making good progress in their classes, and 63 per cent believed students were eager to learn and well-behaved in classes. One-third of students rated themselves 'better than average' in their English literacy skills, but fewer students were as positive about their mathematical literacy skills (boys 31%, girls 25%). Overall, however, students were more positive, with 43 per cent of boys and 37 per cent of girls assessing themselves as 'above average'.

Subjects studied at school

Ten per cent of LSAY cohort members in 2003 were in Year 11, as were 70 per cent in 2004. Figure 3 summarises the subjects they studied in Year 11. English and mathematics subjects were the most common subjects studied by students in Year 11 (English by 99% of students and mathematics 91%). A higher proportion of boys than girls studied subjects in the fields of design and technology (boys 33%, girls 9%), and health and physical education (boys 36%, girls 29%). In contrast, girls were more frequently enrolled in subjects in home economics (girls 31%, boys 10%), creative and performing arts (girls 47%, boys 30%), languages other than English (girls 15%, boys 7%) and studies of society and the environment (girls 53%, boys 45%). Similar proportions of boys and girls studied subjects in the fields of science (around 60%), and business and computing studies (around 43%). Analyses of earlier LSAY cohorts indicate that the types of subjects taken in senior secondary school can have a major impact on the post-school opportunities open to students (Thomson, 2005).

Figure 2 Students' perceptions of student-teacher relationships

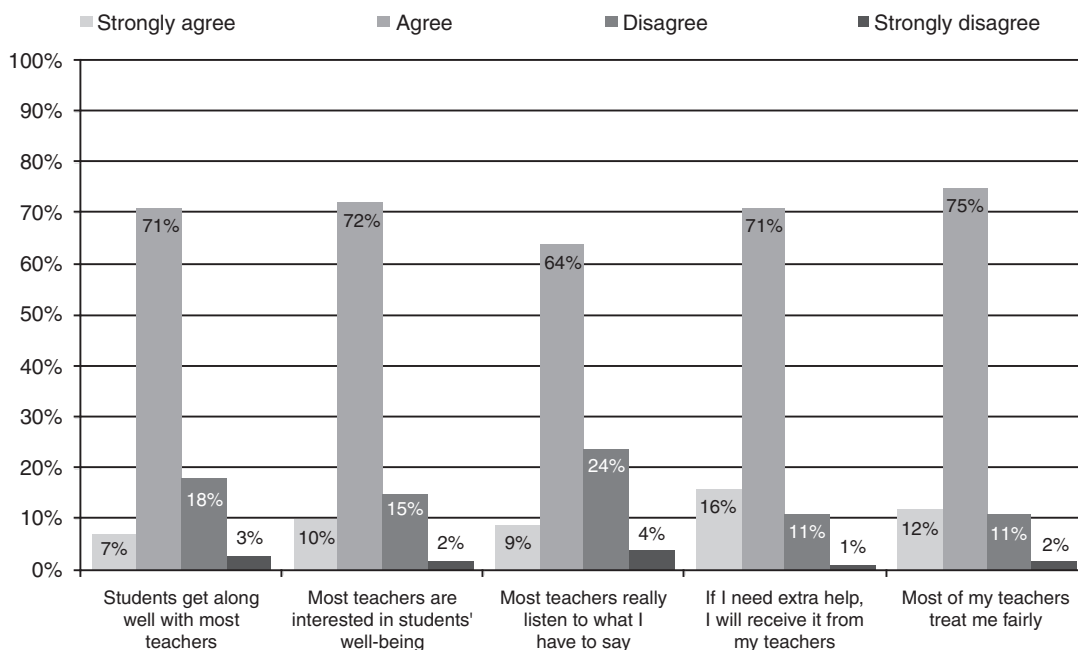
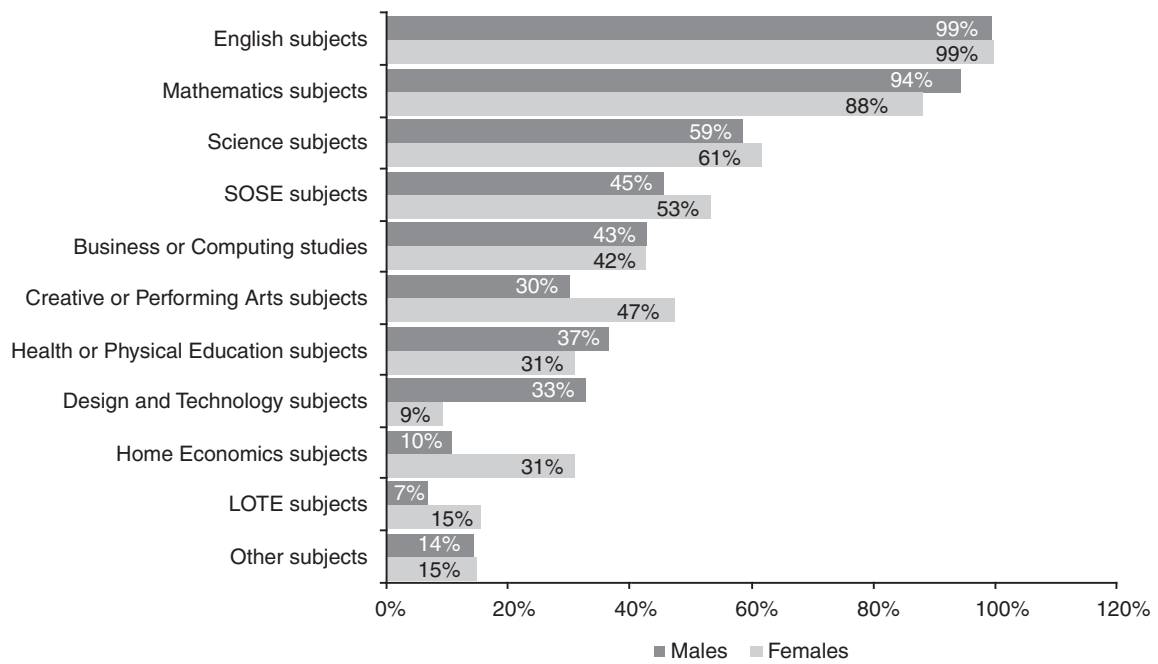


Figure 3 Percentage distribution of subjects studied by Year 11 students, by gender



Participation in school-organised activities

A high proportion of students participated in school-organised activities at least once a week. As Figure 4 shows, sport was the most commonly cited activity, with students participating at least once a

week (boys 58%, girls 47%). Nearly one in four students (27% of girls and 19% of boys) did not participate in sport at school during Year

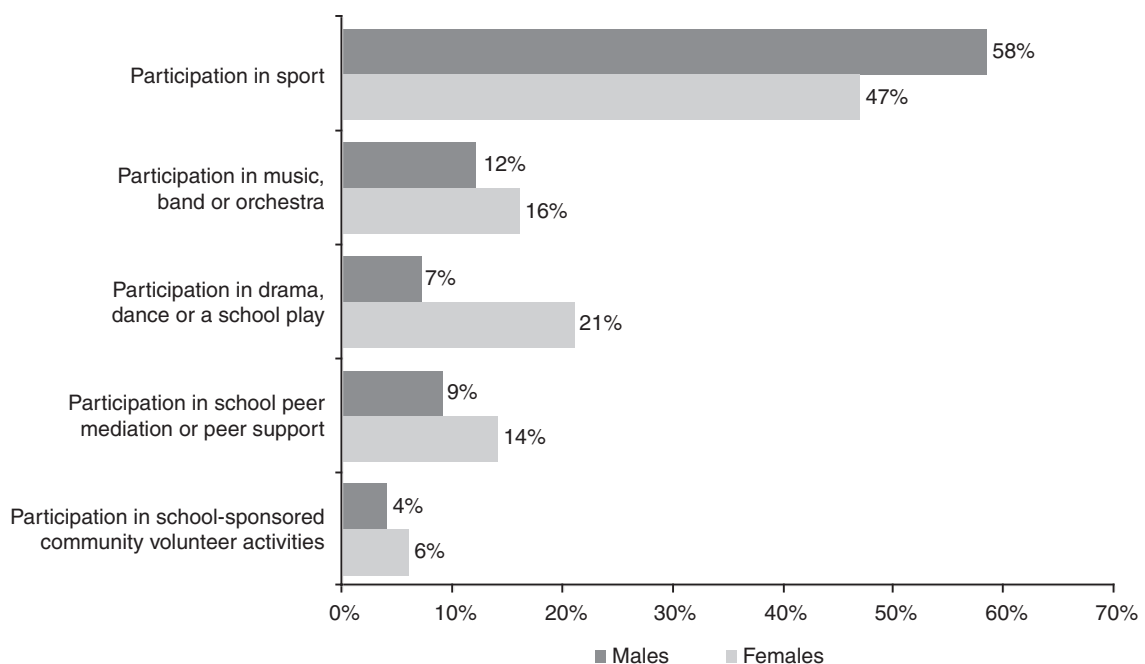
11. Fourteen per cent of students participated in drama, theatre, dance or a school play at least once a week (21% of girls, 7% of boys), and 14 per cent participated in music, band or orchestra at least once a week (16% of girls, 12% of boys). A small percentage of students (6% of

girls and 4% of boys) participated in school-organised volunteer activities in the wider community.

Participation in Work Experience

Approximately three out of five students participated in Work Experience as part of their Year 10 school program, including 57

Figure 4 Student participation in extra-curricular school-organised activities, by gender



per cent of boys and 62 per cent of girls. Overall, students indicated that what they learned the most from Work Experience was how to follow instructions, what skills were required for the job and how to be confident, with girls generally more positive about these aspects than boys. Around 30 per cent of students felt that Work Experience taught them little about the career they would like after leaving school.

Participation in VET in Year 11

Over the past 10 years, VET in Schools has become an important part of the senior school curriculum. About three in ten students (31% of boys and 29% of girls) had enrolled in VET subjects as part of their Year 11 studies. Six per cent of boys and 2 per cent of girls enrolled in a VET subject were doing this study as part of a school-based apprenticeship.

Just under three-fifths of students doing VET (59% of both boys and girls) said that their subjects included a component of workplace learning. Girls were generally more positive in their assessment of the experience of workplace learning. Students indicated that they learned the most about following instructions (67% of girls and 56% of boys), thinking for themselves (67% of girls and 53% of boys), getting along with others (63% of girls and 50% of boys) and being confident (61% of girls and 50% of boys).

Intention to complete Year 12

In 2003, when students were 15 years old, 91 per cent said that they planned on completing Year 12, but this differed by year level at school and gender. Among those in Year 11, 95 per cent said they would continue to Year 12, and there was no difference between boys and girls. By contrast, 79 per cent of boys and 90 per cent of girls in Year 9 or lower years planned to complete Year 12. Boys tended to cite work and apprenticeships as reasons for leaving before Year 12, while girls

tended to cite other types of study as reasons for thinking about leaving.

By the end of 2004 at age 16, 13 per cent of boys and 10 per cent of girls had indeed left school before completing Year 12. Of those who were still at school, 95 per cent planned to complete Year 12, including 96 per cent of those in Year 11 and 87 per cent of those in Year 10 or below.

Post-school plans

In both 2003 and 2004, students were asked what they planned to do in the year after leaving school. Approximately 60 per cent of the students intended to undertake university study (66% of girls and 53% of boys), with little difference between the two years. This percentage is somewhat higher than the proportion of school leavers that has recently enrolled in university in the first two years after completing Year 12, which suggests there may be some demand for university places that is not met.² Data from the 1995 LSAY cohort, however, show that 49 per cent of cohort members had attempted some university study by age 24.

Between the ages of 15 and 16, students developed clearer ideas about post-school study, with an increase from 10 to 14 per cent planning to study at a TAFE college and an increase from 9 to 12 per cent planning to undertake an apprenticeship or traineeship. Overall, the results indicate strong expectations among 15 and 16 year-old school students about continuing in education and training after leaving school.

Combining study and work

In 2003 at age 15, 46 per cent of boys and 53 per cent of girls were working in a job while at school. One-half of those with a job worked more than 10 hours per week. Overall, the median income was \$85 per week. By 2004 at age 16, 48 per cent of boys and 58 per cent of girls were working while at school. There

was little change in the number of hours worked, and the median income rose to \$90. One noticeable difference was in the proportion of students who indicated that their job was a school holiday job, declining from 18 per cent in 2003 to 10 per cent in 2004. These figures suggest that students as they get older are more likely to combine their studies with a part-time job throughout the year.

Earlier LSAY research has shown that working part-time while at secondary school is generally a positive experience, so long as the hours worked each week are not excessive (Robinson, 1999; Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley, 2003).

Summary

Overall, students reported positive experiences that encompassed their attitudes and satisfaction with school life in general, their peers, their sense of belonging and their participation in school organised activities. They also reported positive student-teacher relations. Evidence that students had positive school experiences were also reflected by the fact that 87 per cent of students envisaged pursuing post-school education or training, with only nine per cent expecting to move to a job direct from school.

This briefing was prepared by Catherine Underwood and Sheldon Rothman.

References

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The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

The Longitudinal Surveys of The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) is a research program jointly managed by ACER and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). Funding for LSAY is also provided by the Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC) through the National Fund for Educational Research.

The program includes more than 20 years of data on young Australians

as they move through school and into tertiary education, the labour market and adult life. LSAY commenced in its present form in 1995 with a national sample of Year 9 students. Another sample of Year 9 students was drawn in 1998, and a further sample of 15 year olds was drawn in 2003. Data are first collected in schools, then by mail and telephone interviews.

Advice and guidance are provided by a Steering Committee, with representatives from DEST,

other Australian Government departments, AESOC, the Chief Executive Officers of State and Territory training authorities, non-government schools, academics and ACER.

The data collected through LSAY are deposited with the Australian Social Science Data Archive for access by other analysts.

Further information on the LSAY program is available from ACER's Website: www.acer.edu.au



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