

Learning experience of students from low-income families

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Attitudes towards school and learning among students from low-income households

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Introduction

Since the mid-1960s, educational researchers have explored in detail the factors that contribute to school achievement. A landmark study by Coleman and colleagues (Coleman et al 1966) found that variations in school 'input measures' had little impact on student performance on standardized tests. Put simply, family background mattered more for school outcomes than what happened in the school. Debate on the relative importance of these factors shows little sign of abating (see Kain and Singleton 1996 for an overview of this literature; Card and Krueger 1998).

Another critical school outcome, however, is whether students become enthusiastic lifelong learners, that is, whether they *learn how to learn* and develop the motivation to do so. The latter is particularly important. As Schuller (2001:68) has argued, 'probably the single most important factor in effective learning is student motivation', and one of the most useful ways to measure this is to examine whether students exhibit positive attitudes towards the learning process. Students who display negative attitudes towards the learning process are more likely to leave school early and as the study by Harding, Lloyd and Greenwell noted, there is an important link between education and lifetime economic outcomes. A negative attitude towards learning at school may therefore be an indirect, but significant barrier towards participation in later life.

This paper examines, in a preliminary fashion, how the learning experiences of students from The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* (LFL) program compare with those of other students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The analysis reported here is based on data from a survey of 462 Year 11 LFL students conducted in 2001. The LFL program provides financial and educational support to disadvantaged families and their children. It aims to help students take part in mainstream school activities, such as excursions and school electives, so that their opportunities to participate more fully in the life of the school is enhanced (see Zappalà & Parker 2000). A key objective of LFL is to improve the 'life opportunities and self-esteem' of students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds so that 'they will have a better chance of not falling into a cycle of disadvantage' (Smyth, Zappalà & Considine 2002a:1).

In addition, we compare the findings for the LFL students with results from a comparable group of Year 11 students that participated in the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY), a major national survey conducted annually since 1995 by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). Further details on the data sources and surveys are contained in Appendix two.

In particular, we examine two key issues in this paper:

- How do students evaluate their school and classroom experiences?
- Do students experience serious learning problems?

The next section examines attitudes towards school and learning among LFL students, before comparing the findings with the control group from the LSAY. This is followed by an examination, again among both LFL and LSAY student groups, of whether students experience problems with learning. The final section of the paper discusses some of the implications of the findings.

Attitudes towards school and learning among the LFL students

Students were asked if they agreed with four attitudinal items that tapped into their feelings about school and learning. On a five-point scale ('strongly agree' through to 'strongly disagree') they were asked if their school was a place where:

- 'I feel happy';
- 'I really like to go each day';
- 'I get enjoyment from being there'; and
- 'I enjoy what I do in class'.

Three of these items are general responses to school, while the last is specific to learning. Many students enjoy the social aspects of school, friends and sporting activities, for example, and might well agree with some of these items on non-educational grounds. The inclusion of the last item ensures that an educational issue is also explored. For this reason, we give more weight to this item in our subsequent discussions. In our analysis, we regard those students as positive towards school if they answered 'strongly agree' to these attitudinal items.¹ Table 2.1 summarises the key demographic and background factors of LFL students who 'strongly agreed' with these four items.

The most pronounced differences that emerged were where:

- Parents have a tertiary education;
- Students live in metropolitan areas; and
- Students plan to study at university or undertake an apprenticeship.

Table 2.1 Attitudes towards school and learning, background of LFL students (%)

Background	Feel happy	Like to go	Enjoy being there	Enjoy class
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¹ The LFL and LSAY questionnaires used slightly different scales which makes comparison on the 'agree' categories unreliable. The 'neutral' option was offered as a middle position in the LFL questionnaire and as a residual position (at the end) in the LSAY questionnaire. As a result, across many questions, around one fifth of LFL students regularly opted to 'sit on the fence' in the neutral position, whereas only a few percent of the LSAY students opted for the residual position. In order to make the questionnaires comparable, we have assumed that all of the fence sitters among the LFL students would have opted for the 'agree' or 'disagree' option if they had confronted the LSAY scale where the neutral option was not available. They would not have changed their view to that of 'strongly agree' or 'strongly disagree'. For this reason, we would argue, restricting the analysis to a comparison of the 'strongly agree' students makes the two questionnaires comparable.

<i>Gender</i>				
Male	10	9	8	10
Female	13	9	11	10
<i>Parents' educational qualifications</i>				
Tertiary	15	23	15	19
Non-tertiary	12	8	9	9
<i>School sector</i>				
Government	12	9	10	10
Non-government	17	10	10	13
<i>Type of housing</i>				
Public rental	13	9	12	9
Private rental, buying or ownership	11	9	8	10
<i>Geographical location</i>				
Metropolitan	16	10	12	12
Non-metropolitan	8	7	6	8
<i>Family type</i>				
Single parent	10	8	10	9
Not a single parent	14	10	9	11
<i>Plans for when leave school</i>				
No further study	8	9	8	6
Apprenticeship	9	9	6	17
TAFE studies	15	9	13	11
University studies	21	12	15	15

In each case, students are much more likely to report very positive attitudes towards school and learning. Nearly one fifth of students who have parent(s) with a tertiary education, for example, strongly agree that they enjoy what they do in class, whereas only one tenth of students whose parent(s) do not have tertiary qualifications feel this way. Similarly, about 12 per cent of students living in metropolitan locations strongly agree that they enjoy being at school, whereas only six per cent of students outside metropolitan areas feel this way. Finally, only about six per cent of students with no future plans for studying strongly agree that they enjoy class. In contrast, for students planning to undertake an apprenticeship the comparable figure is 17 per cent, and for those planning to study at university the comparable figure is 15 per cent.

The problem with simple cross-tabulations of the data is that compositional effects, or confounding influences, may be shaping the results.² To reduce these possible influences, we used multivariate techniques. These enable us to hold the effect of all the other variables constant while examining the effect of each particular variable. This approach, which in this case makes use of logit models, is adopted throughout this paper and the results are presented as odds ratios. These express how much more likely it is that the odds of a certain outcome – strongly feeling happy compared with not strongly feeling happy – are associated with a particular variable (such as parents' educational qualifications).

When the data in Table 2.1 is entered into a logit model, these three variables – parents' tertiary education, metropolitan location and post-school plans – emerge as statistically significant across several of the items. In order not to clutter the discussion with unnecessary technical details, Table 2.2 simply summarises the key logit results. It shows that for the important 'I enjoy what I do in class' item, the student's post-school plans is the only statistically significant variable. If the student plans to study at

² For example, there may be a disproportionate number of female students in the sample or an unduly strong influence coming from type of housing.

university or undertake an apprenticeship (compared with no further study), then she/he has about three times the odds of enjoying what she/he does in class. The results vary across the other items:

- Tertiary education of the parent(s) is statistically significant for the ‘I really like to go each day’ item;
- Metropolitan location is statistically significant for the ‘I feel happy’ and ‘I get enjoyment from being there’ items; and
- Plans to study at university is statistically significant for the ‘I feel happy’ item.

Table 2.2 Attitudes towards school and learning, key logit results for background factors (odds ratios)

My school is a place where ...	Tertiary educated parent(s)	Metro location	Plans: apprenticeship	Plans: university
I feel happy	-	2.9	-	3.2
I really like to go each day	3.3	-	-	-
I get enjoyment from being there	-	2.3	-	-
I enjoy what I do in class	-	-	3.3	2.8

Source: LFL 2001 Survey

Note: All items statistically significant at 0.05.

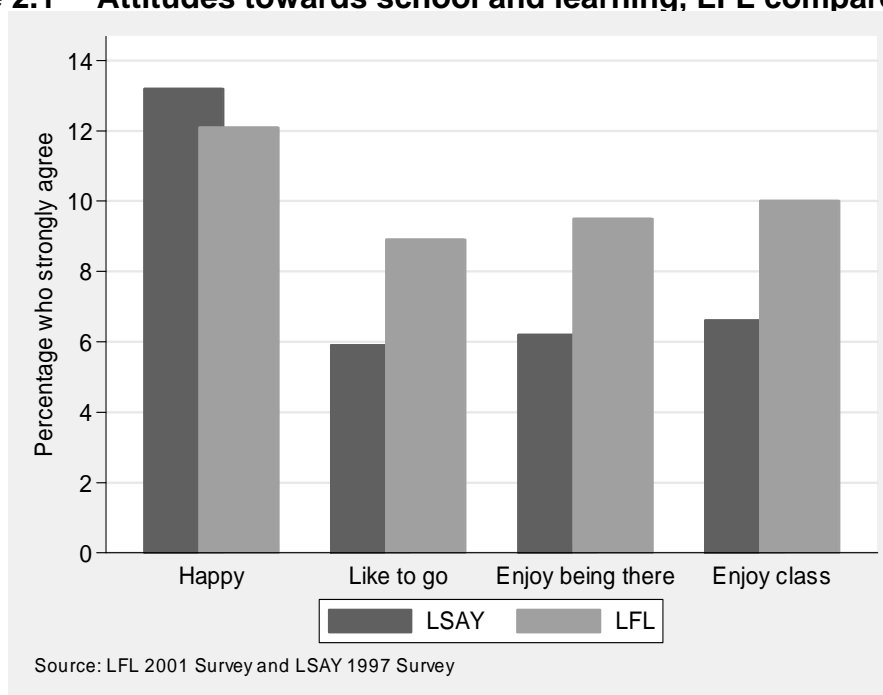
Attitudes towards school and learning: comparison with a control group

While it is useful to know that about one fifth of students with tertiary educated parent(s) strongly agree that they enjoy what they do in class (Table 2.1), this does not tell us enough. Is this a high or low figure? It all depends on the nature of the comparison we undertake and hence, we make use of a relevant control group. While the control group we have chosen is by no means perfect (see Appendix 2), it does allow us to restrict the general student population to that subset most likely to match the LFL students. In the following discussion, we refer to this sub-set of students from the general population as the ‘LSAY students’.

Figure 2.1 shows that there is little difference on the happiness item between LFL students and LSAY students, and a small margin in favour of LFL students, on the other three items. In other words, LFL students appear to be slightly more likely to ‘strongly agree’ with a range of positive statements about school and learning. We again modeled this data using multivariate methods in order to control for compositional effects or confounding influences. In this case, we were restricted to a smaller set of background factors, because not all of the factors discussed earlier were available in both data sets.³ We again present only the key results from this modeling, listing only those variables that were statistically significant.

³ Type of housing, geographical location, and family type were excluded.

Figure 2.1 Attitudes towards school and learning, LFL compared with LSAY



As Table 2.3 shows, being on the *Learning for Life* program is associated with increased odds – around a two-fold increase – *in feeling very positive about three of the items concerning school and learning*. Only on the happiness item is there no statistically significant difference. The other factors that emerged as statistically significant were:

- Being at a government school was associated with *reduced* odds of feeling happy, as was planning to undertake an apprenticeship;
- Intending to study at university was associated with increased odds – in the order of two times – across all of the items; and
- Having a parent or guardian with a tertiary qualification was associated with increased odds of feeling very positive on the important ‘I enjoy what I do in class’ item.

Table 2.3 Attitudes towards school and learning, key logit results for LFL/LSAY comparison (odds ratios)

Background	Feel happy	Like to go	Enjoy being there	Enjoy class
<i>LFL/LSAY</i>				
On LFL program	-	1.9	1.9	1.9
<i>Tertiary qual. of parent/No tert quals</i>				
Has tertiary quals	-	-	-	1.7
<i>Government/non government school</i>				
Government school	0.6	-	-	-
<i>Post-school plans*</i>				
TAFE	-	-	-	-
Apprenticeship	0.5	-	-	-
University	1.8	1.9	2.8	1.8

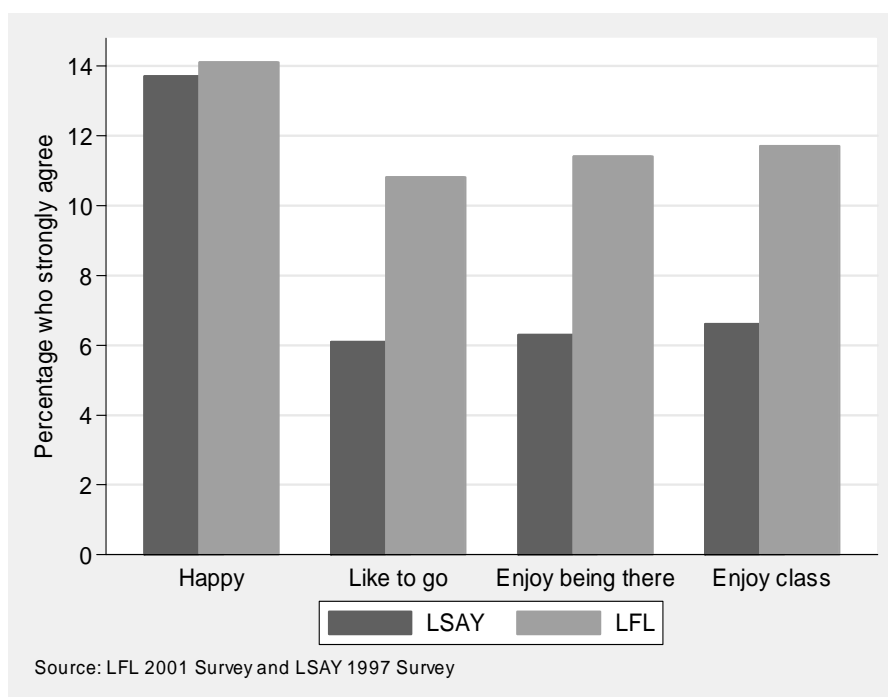
Source: LFL 2001 Survey and LSAY 1997 Survey

Note: *Omitted (contrast) category is "no further study". All items statistically significant at 0.05.

These results suggest that the initial differences shown in Figure 2.1 are sustained after we have controlled for a number of key background and contextual factors. *In other words, the LFL students do indeed appear to be more positive about school and learning than are a similar group of students from the general population, taking into account the other characteristics of the students.*

While odds ratios are useful for assessing the impact of particular variables, it is more useful to calculate predicted probabilities in order to assess the overall effect of all the control variables.⁴ These probabilities are presented in the form of a table of comparisons, showing ‘adjusted’ and ‘unadjusted’ probabilities. The *unadjusted* probabilities are simply the percentages shown in a simple cross-tabulation of student type by attitudinal item and were illustrated earlier in Figure 2.1. The *adjusted* probabilities, on the other hand, are a cross-tabulation in which the cells are composed of the probabilities predicted by the model, that is, the probabilities with all other factors controlled. Table 2.4 shows the comparison of these probabilities, while Figure 2.2 graphs the adjusted probabilities. This comparison confirms the analysis just discussed. Indeed, this table suggests that after controlling for the various background and contextual factors, the differences in probabilities between the LFL students and the LSAY students is actually slightly larger.

Figure 2.2 Adjusted attitudes towards school and learning, LFL compared with LSAY



In summary, apart from the general sentiment of feeling happy, the LFL students are more likely than the LSAY students to report feeling strongly that they enjoy school and learning. Specifically, they feel strongly that they enjoy going to school, that they enjoy being there, and that they enjoy what they do in class. The latter item is

⁴ These probabilities are estimated by the logit model that was fitted to the data.

particularly important, because it points towards the specific educational aspects of school life, rather than just the sociability of the school environment. While the overall magnitude of these sentiments is not large (about one tenth of the LFL student population), it is important to keep in mind that the sentiments expressed were at the extreme end of the scale. This ten per cent of LFL students are those who feel these positive attitudes *very strongly*.

Table 2.4 Attitudes towards school and learning

My school is a place where ...	Unadjusted (%)		Adjusted (%)	
	LSAY	LFL	LSAY	LFL
I feel happy	13	12	14	14
I really like to go each day	6	9	6	11
I get enjoyment from being there	6	10	6	11
I enjoy what I do in class	7	10	7	12

Problems with learning among the LFL students

This section of the analysis also focuses on a small sub-group of students (just under one-quarter of the student population), those who were experiencing difficulty with their learning. The bulk of students fall into middle positions, that is, they experienced difficulties sometimes, but not facing serious learning problems. Unfortunately, the definition of learning problems is not identical between the LFL students and the LSAY students, but we are confident that we are dealing with a very similar phenomenon in both groups. Specifically, we have defined LFL students with learning problems as those who answered that they had serious problems with either reading, maths or writing, either 'all of the time' or 'quite a lot of the time'. For the LSAY students, we defined students as having learning problems if they reported that they were doing 'not very well' or 'very poorly' to either of the questions dealing with the school subjects of English and Maths. On this basis, approximately 21 per cent of LFL students and 24 per cent of LSAY students were defined as experiencing learning problems.

Table 2.5 Problems with learning, background of LFL students

Background	Experiencing problems (%)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	20
Female	22
<i>Parents' educational qualifications</i>	
Tertiary	15
Non-tertiary	22
<i>School sector</i>	
Government	22
Non-government	17
<i>Type of housing</i>	
Public rental	23
Private rental, buying or ownership	20
<i>Geographical location</i>	
Metropolitan	22
Non-metropolitan	21
<i>Family type</i>	
Single parent	17
Not a single parent	26
<i>Plans for when leave school</i>	
No further study	22
Apprenticeship	24
TAFE studies	42
University studies	16

Table 2.5 shows the percentage of LFL students who experienced learning problems by a similar range of background characteristics as discussed previously. The key findings were:

- Students whose parent(s) have tertiary qualifications are again advantaged, with only 15 per cent experiencing problems (compared with 22% among other students);
- Students at non-government school are less likely to have learning problems (17%) compared with those at government schools (22%);
- Students coming from homes with a single parent are less likely to have learning problems (17%) compared with other students (26%); and
- Students with plans for university are less likely to have learning problems (16 per cent) while students with plans for TAFE are much more likely to have learning problems (42 per cent).⁵

Problems with learning: comparison with a control group

As noted earlier, there was little difference between the two student populations (21 versus 24 per cent) in terms of those defined as having learning problems. In fitting a logit model to the data, however, only post-school plans were both statistically

⁵ Unfortunately, a multivariate analysis did not further illuminate the findings, since a logit model comparable to the earlier one (Table 2.2) did not fit the data adequately.

significant and substantively significant. Specifically, an intention to study at university is associated with decreased odds (about 0.4) of experiencing learning problems.⁶ This result is not particularly illuminating, as the fact that a focus on university as a destination is the most important factor explaining an absence of learning problems is somewhat axiomatic, since students with severe learning problems are unlikely to view university as a realistic destination.

In summary, while this analysis provides very little in the way of interesting findings compared with the earlier discussion, it is important in showing that LFL students do not differ from the general student population when it comes to experiencing learning problems.

We deliberately focused on two subgroups in our analysis, those at the 'top' (in attitudinal terms) and those at the 'bottom' (in learning terms). While this has the disadvantage that only a small proportion of students are relevant (between one tenth and one quarter), it does have the advantage of allowing contrasts to be sharper. The role of planning for post-school destinations emerged as the critical factor in shaping attitudes towards school and learning. Given the orientation of schools towards university entrance, it is not surprising that this destination features so prominently. It is interesting to note, however, that among the LFL students, those with plans for apprenticeships also feel just as positively about their classroom learning. Furthermore, this comes from a group who do not appear to be enamoured of school in other respects.

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this paper was to describe and compare the learning experiences of Year 11 students on the *Learning for Life* (LFL) program with the learning experiences of a similar group of Year 11 students in the general population who were involved in the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY). Our comparisons were drawn along two polarised issues:

- A focus on a positive aspect of the learning experience – examining the factors contributing to differences among those Year 11 students with strong positive attitudes towards school and learning;
- A focus on a negative aspect of the learning experience – examining students with serious learning problems.

When examining the positive aspect of the learning experience this study found that there were a number of factors significantly associated with LFL and LSAY students having strong positive attitudes toward school and learning.

Post-school plans

⁶ While three other variables – male, government school and parent with tertiary qualifications – were statistically significant, the odds ratios were not substantively significant (reductions in the order of 0.9 and 0.8). Furthermore, when adjusted and non-adjusted probabilities were compared between the two groups of students, the original difference (21 versus 24%) further weakened (23 versus 25 per cent).

The post-school plans of students provide an indication of the level of success in school and their subsequent attitudes towards school and learning. It is therefore not surprising that intention to study at university was associated with increased odds of having strong positive attitudes towards school and learning, especially when compared with students who had 'no plans for study' after school. Similarly, it is not surprising that students who intended to enter an apprenticeship after leaving school were also more likely to be strongly positive about learning. This would be particularly so if these students were taking VET (vocational education and training) related subjects in Year 11. This could explain why their 'classroom' sentiments differed from their more general school sentiment.

Parental education level

In an earlier study examining the factors influencing the academic performance of all students on the LFL program from kindergarten to Year 12, it was found that parents' education level significantly influenced student academic performance (Zappalà and Considine 2001; Considine and Zappalà 2002). Students who had a parent(s) with university qualifications achieved higher levels of academic performance than students who did not have a parent(s) with university qualifications. Furthermore, the authors of this study posited that parents with higher educational attainment may have been more likely to promote the value of higher levels of achievement, and to provide both the psychological and educational support students needed to excel in school (Zappalà and Considine 2001).

Similarly, another study by Zappalà and McLaren, examined the factors associated with home computer and Internet access and usage among a large sample of LFL students. Once again, the level of parental education was prominent, with home access and usage of computers and Internet among students increasing as the level of parental education increased (see also, McLaren and Zappalà 2002).

The results of this analysis of attitudes to learning suggest a consistency with these previous studies. When controlling for all other background variables, LFL students living with a parent(s) with a tertiary education were more than *three times more likely* to report having very positive feelings about going to school each day, compared with students whose parents did not have tertiary qualifications. Taking the results of these three studies together suggests that parents who have pursued higher levels of education themselves may be more likely to foster a positive attitude towards school in their children.

Metropolitan location

Studies have examined the relative disadvantage suffered by students in non-metropolitan areas and found that students from rural and remote areas have poorer educational outcomes compared to students from metropolitan areas (Cheers 1990; HREOC 2000). We would argue that this is likely to influence their subjective experience of school and be reflected in their attitudes towards school and learning, something consistent with our findings. Research has also suggested a range of other issues that contribute to a relatively poorer experience of the learning environment for students in non-metropolitan areas (HREOC 2000):

- Problems with travel time;
- The availability of transport to and from school;
- The quality of educational services, including restricted subject choices; and
- Lower levels of family income support.

It is feasible to assume that these same factors are influencing the educational experiences of students on the LFL program who live in non-metropolitan areas, and hence contributing to lower levels in this measure of strong positive attitudes towards school and learning.

School sector

A number of studies have shown a 'school effect' with regard to different educational outcomes, in that students attending state government schools are less likely to stay on at school and have school scores at the lower end than do students attending non-government schools (Prior & Beggs 1989; Buckingham 2000). In addition, some researchers have suggested that the quality and attitude of teachers is poorer in state schools and that teachers in 'disadvantaged' state schools often have lower expectations of their students (Sparkes 1999; Ruge 1998). It is important to note that government schools featured adversely in our results only with regard to the 'I am happy' item, and not with respect to the other school and classroom related items. This may well reflect a compositional effect in government schools, that is, something about the student population in these schools, rather than a reflection on what happens in those schools.

The LFL program

Although a number of factors emerged from our analysis, the key issue of interest was that after controlling for all other factors, the LFL students were more likely to be strongly positive about their school and learning experiences than the LSAY students. These results show that Year 11 LFL students generally get more enjoyment out of their learning and educational experiences than do a comparable group of Year 11 students from the general population.

Why do the LFL students emerge as more likely to be strongly positive about school and learning? A possible explanation for this can be found by looking at a separate issue explored in the first of the three annual surveys conducted with the Year 11 students published elsewhere (Smyth et al. 2002a; Zappalà et al 2002). In this paper the analyses focused on student perceptions of the effectiveness of the LFL program in facilitating their ability to participate in elective subjects and in school excursions. The results showed that the majority of LFL students were either satisfied, or very satisfied, with the extent to which the LFL program helped them to participate in these school activities. An increased ability to participate more fully in school life and the influence this has on general attitudes towards school and learning warrants further attention. Additional data is required to determine the extent to which interactions between increased participation in school life and attitudes towards school and learning have been directly influenced by being on the LFL program. In other words, it

cannot be inferred from these findings that being on the LFL program has *caused* these students to be more positive about their learning and school experience.⁷

Factors influencing negative learning experiences

Overall, our findings show that the key factor that influenced positive aspects of the learning experience, namely, intention to study at university, also provided a buffer against the problem of learning difficulties. Most importantly, we found no difference between LFL students and LSAY students with regard to the incidence of learning difficulties.

Interestingly, when examining just the background of the LFL students (and excluding the LSAY students) students whose parents or guardians had a university qualification were less likely to have learning difficulties 15 per cent compared to 22 per cent. In the subsequent multivariate analysis including LSAY students, however, the parental education factor was no longer significant. The most likely reason for this finding is that among the LFL students there was only a very small percentage of students (approximately 5%) who had a parent(s) with university qualifications. With so few students in this category, it is difficult to determine the extent of co-variation between this variable and other factors.⁸ It is possible that in the formative years of learning, the influence of the parental education is probably very important in passing on educational aspirations to children. Once a child reaches Year 11, however, the influence of parental education becomes far less of a driving factor in decreasing educational disadvantage than does having formulated ideas for university study which may motivate learning in high school.

It could be argued that one should not mix demographic and non-demographic variables, because the latter are themselves very much the product of the former. According to this logic, our inclusion of post-school plans may have obscured the importance of parental education. Such a criticism, however, overlooks the dynamics of schooling, particularly the agency of students who formulate plans and develop various strategies for life as part of their maturing. We believe that incorporating this perspective – the agency of students – is just as important as is incorporating the more structural demographic factors.

Another issue for consideration with regard to this finding are compositional differences between LFL students and LSAY students. Our 'control group', was based on a loose wealth measure rather than a precise income measure. Moreover, the LFL students themselves might be quite unique because of the nature of the LFL program. One of the aims of the LFL program, for example, is to improve retention rates among students at risk of leaving school early. It is possible that among the Year 11 LFL cohort, there were a substantive number of students who may not have continued onto

⁷ It is possible, for instance, that: students with more positive attitudes towards school and learning may be more likely to participate in the LFL program; LFL students may be reluctant to report any negative attitudes on a survey conducted by The Smith Family; or their positive attitudes may be a function of merely being involved in the study. In addition, data not yet available on the length of time students have spent on the program, and the nature and extent of individually directed attention from the LFL Education Support Workers, are likely to have a significant influence on analyses of both attitudinal and academic outcomes. A further aim of this longitudinal study is to gather both quantitative and qualitative information on these data items that may assist in providing a more in-depth assessment of the LFL program.

⁸ Among the comparable group of LSAY students, however, there was a much larger percentage (approximately 15%) of students with a tertiary educated parent. The influence of this factor was largely subsumed by the influence of post-school plans.

Year 11 without the support of The Smith Family and who therefore had not yet formulated their post-school plans.

Single parent households

One of the most notable findings of this analysis is that students from homes with a single parent are much less likely to experience learning difficulties compared to other students. One-parent households do not have a negative impact on the learning experiences of students, and do not increase the likelihood of a child having serious learning problems. This finding is also consistent with an earlier study that found that students from low socio-economic status (SES) single-parent households were not adversely affected with regard to academic performance (Zappalà & Considine 2001). Together these results contradict other research findings (e.g. Rich 2000) and popular stereotypes upheld in the media, that suggest that students from single-parent households are more likely to have poor educational outcomes than are students from two parent families. This is in spite of the fact highlighted by Harding and colleagues that sole parent households generally face severe financial disadvantage.

One possible explanation for this difference in our findings is that the influence of family structure has previously only been studied in relation to all SES groups (high through to low SES). In such studies the heterogeneity that exists within any particular SES band is masked, and characteristics which dominate any particular SES band increase in significance. By way of contrast, the Zappalà and Considine (2001) and the Zappalà and McLaren study as well as the current study, have all focused exclusively on students from low SES backgrounds, and thus they provide a greater insight into the specific factors contributing to the school and learning experience of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In conclusion, the findings from this paper call into question the prevailing assumption that students from low SES backgrounds are a homogenous group. The diversity of factors which influence different attitudes towards learning and education, and which impact on learning difficulties, highlights the need to continue to diversify and tailor school-based intervention programs which aim to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Appendix 2

The research presented in this paper forms part of a three-year longitudinal study of the school-to-work transition process of students on *Learning for Life* (LFL) conducted jointly between ACIRRT, at the University of Sydney, and The Smith Family (see Smyth, Zappalà & Considine 2002b for further details). Two survey datasets were used for this analysis. The data on LFL students comes from the first of three annual longitudinal surveys conducted with students who were in Year 11 in 2001. The survey achieved a response rate of 60 per cent, a good result for a mail questionnaire (see Zappalà, Smyth & Considine 2002 for further details on the survey). In all, some 462 Year 11 students participated in the survey. The annual surveys also included questionnaires sent to Year 8 students (approximately 800 students) but this group of students is not included in this analysis.

The data for the control group come from one of the surveys that form part of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), the latest in a series of important longitudinal youth projects in Australia. Since 1978, longitudinal projects of youth have included the Youth in Transition Project (YIT), the Australian Longitudinal Survey (ALS), and the Australian Youth Survey (AYS) (see Thorn 2000). The LSAY has followed a number of cohorts of young people since 1995, drawing its sample from all States and Territories in Australia. The students analysed for this paper were in year 11 in 1997 and numbered 10,307 (See Marks & Long 2000; and Marks, McMillan & Hillman 2001 for further details about the LSAY data).

Participants in the LFL program are not, of course, a representative sample of students, they come from families living in financial disadvantage. In practice, this amounts to families whose parents/guardians are overwhelmingly receiving social security benefits (mostly sole parent and unemployment benefits). Obtaining a close match for the LFL students from the LSAY control group was not straightforward. The LSAY data provides no information on income, family type nor labour market status, variables that might help match the LSAY student cohort more closely to the LFL students.

Instead, we constructed an asset-based measure of family wealth, based on data like whether families own dishwashers, computers, CD players, pianos and so forth. These items were summed to delineate a 'low wealth' family, in this case, those who own four or less out of ten items. Students from these family groups were used as the control group for the LFL students. While this is not a perfect measure of financial disadvantage, in the absence of other data items, it provided the best approach for creating a relevant control group.

Finally, the paper does *not* attempt any kind of assessment of the LFL program. At this stage of the research we do not have data on the initial educational situation of LFL students, their length of time on the program, nor the kinds of educational 'inputs' which the LFL program has provided. As a consequence, assessing outcomes as a result of interventions is not feasible at this stage of the research (see Zappalà et al 2002 for a preliminary assessment of the LFL program). Instead, at the very least, this paper can be seen as providing an educational profile of the LFL students, making use of a 'control group' to highlight the distinctiveness, or otherwise, of the LFL students.

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