

# 1. Overview

The Competent Children Competent Learners project is a longitudinal study which focuses on a group of about 500 young people from the greater Wellington region (Wellington, Hutt, Kapiti, and Wairarapa). It is funded by the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

The project started in 1993, when the young people were almost 5 years old and in early childhood education. Its original purpose was to look at whether — and how — early childhood education helps children become lifelong learners. The project has charted the development of the students' cognitive competencies, as well as the development of their social and communication skills.

It also explores the students' home and education experiences to find out which of these experiences may account for differences in their patterns of development and performance.

So far we have collected data on the young people at two-yearly intervals — at ages 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14 and 16; we will be returning to the young people later in 2008 and in 2009, when they are 20. This summary, *Competent Learners On the Edge of Adulthood*, presents key findings from the five research reports completed using data collected in 2005, when the students were 16.

Altogether, 447 young people took part in the age-16 phase of the project. Of these, 420 were still at school, and 27 had left school. Most were still living in the Wellington area, but 50 were living in other parts of New Zealand. Just over half the school students were in Year 12, and the remainder in Year 11. They attended a total of 72 different secondary schools.

It is important to note that our sample was not intended to be representative of all New Zealand children. Rather, it was drawn to represent the proportions of children attending the main types of early childhood education in the Wellington region

in 1993. Compared to the national average, our sample has higher proportions of young people from high-income families, and with mothers who have trade and tertiary-level qualifications. Our sample also has lower than average proportions of Māori and Pacific young people, and those who attend low decile schools.

This means that some of our findings may give a slightly more positive picture than you would get from a truly representative sample of New Zealand 16-year-olds. This is particularly the case for the findings that are affected by family income and maternal qualifications.

However, the sample does have enough 16-year-olds in different situations to allow us to compare how those different situations might make a difference for their performance and experiences, so that we can provide a reasonable picture of the weight of those different situations in what is happening for 16-year-olds across the whole of New Zealand.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Most — 70 percent — of the 16-year-olds in this study had good school attendance and were engaged with learning, both in and outside school. However, levels of boredom and restlessness at school had risen, and a fifth wanted to leave as soon as they could. Just half the students' parents thought they were still enthusiastic about school.
- Engagement in school — feeling positive about learning and being at school — reflects both current learning opportunities, and previous

positive experiences of school and learning that have built the knowledge and habits that support continued learning. Disengagement in learning — not doing work in class — often starts before students reach secondary school. If students do not have the literacy and numeracy levels they need to keep learning, plus the attitudes and skills that support learning, then they can lose motivation. Other things become more attractive, such as behaviour and friends that involve risk.

- Those 16-year-olds who had already left school did so largely because they were bored or had got into trouble. A few left to pursue work that appealed to them. Most early school leavers had low school motivation levels and low competency levels at age 14. While most of this group were optimistic about the future, female school leavers were the unhappiest group in the study.
- Most of the school leavers' parents wished they had not left school, and 59 percent of the school leavers would have liked more guidance on school subjects. But they did not want to return to school. They preferred the kind of learning they were getting now: more 'real life' and 'relevant'.
- In the classes that students enjoyed the most, teachers were more likely to: frame things clearly; show interest in them; make connections with student interests and experiences; give them feedback that helped them see what to do next; and offer plenty of practical or hands-on activities.
- In the most enjoyed classes, teachers were weaving the key competencies into their teaching. Students said they thought more about their learning in the classes they enjoyed the most.
- Student enjoyment of classes is closely linked to how engaged students are in learning. Engagement in learning is linked in turn to levels of student performance in literacy, numeracy and NCEA.
- NCEA performance is related to a student's levels of literacy and numeracy, both past and present. However, good attitudes and work habits are also important. This underlines the value of including the key competencies in teaching plans and approaches.
- There is little evidence that the students were making minimal effort with NCEA. Many got more credits than they needed to achieve NCEA levels 1 and 2. Only 6 percent of students reported taking up opportunities for reassessment, and few reported skipping assessments.
- Parents' views of NCEA were related to how satisfied they were with their child's progress at school. This suggests that for some parents, NCEA is acting as a 'lightning rod' for dissatisfaction with other aspects of the school system.
- By 16, our participants were having more adult experiences than at 14. They drank more alcohol, and they were experimenting with sex and drugs. Just under half had a paid job on at least one day a week. But most remained well connected with their family, and felt supported by them, though fewer than half shared their problems with their parents.
- Friendships continue to be important at age 16, with an emphasis now on friendships that involve support and trust. Long-lasting friendships were also more valued.
- The everyday leisure activities our participants spent the most time doing were: text messaging; watching television; hanging out with friends; using the computer, and exercise or sport. They read less, played less sport, watched a little less television and spent less time playing computer games than at age 14.
- In general our participants had a positive and open outlook towards leaving school. However the opportunities seen as the most positive — such

as establishing a career and more freedom to manage money and time — were also seen as the biggest challenges.

- Young people who do well in the areas most valued by teachers and school (e.g. enjoyment of reading, being focused and responsible, high cognitive competency) are consistently more likely to see themselves undertaking tertiary study, having professional occupations, and fewer barriers to the life they desire. Those from families with low incomes and low maternal qualifications are less likely to expect to undertake tertiary studies and aspire to professional occupations.
- Participants made a distinction between having a job and a career. They identified with more traditional ideas about career, such as promotion within one workplace, but they also agreed with newer ideas such as work-life balance, and the notion of having a qualification that you can keep building on with more qualifications and experience.
- Around half of the students reported not participating in many of the key careers guidance activities typically offered through schools. For most, families were their single most useful source of career information and 41 percent of students said they had never talked to a teacher or career advisor about their future options.
- There is little evidence that the transition to secondary school has any negative impact on student performance, or changes patterns that were previously established.

**Key findings reported in the age-14 round of the study continued to be evident two years later.**

**These include:**

- the difficulty of raising low levels of performance after age 8. However, it can be done; and those who make progress are most likely to do so

gradually, showing the importance of continued support rather than one-off ‘interventions’ that are not followed up.

- the value of good quality staff:child interaction and a ‘print-saturated’ environment when children attend early childhood education.
- the interdependent nature of literacy and numeracy, and aspects of the key competencies. This finding supports the framework of the revised New Zealand Curriculum.
- social characteristics account for some of the difference in young people’s scores, but not most of it. Parental education and income levels carry more weight here than do gender or ethnicity. That’s because they are related to the kinds of learning opportunities children may have at home, as well as confidence in the education system.
- the importance of judging student need on the basis of actual performance and interests, not just on social characteristics or prior performance.

Some quick indicators that suggest a child or young person is well-placed for learning are:

- they enjoy reading
- they have interests that provide goals and challenges, and a sense of achievement
- they have interests that involve communication or the use of symbols.

Some quick indicators that suggest a child or young person is not well-placed for learning are:

- their main leisure activity is television or computer games
- they have no interests
- they are involved in bullying.