

Students' Attitudes Towards School, Teachers and their Subjects over the Transition and Beyond

Research suggests that the early years of secondary school can be a time of academic difficulty for many students and this was indeed the case for a number of students in our study, as shown in the previous chapters of this report. Some studies have also found that students' attitudes towards school, and to particular subjects, become less positive as they progress through the school system.⁴⁴ In this chapter we look at how students' attitudes towards school, their teachers and particular subjects changed over the course of the study and investigate whether there is any relationship between students' attitudes and their achievement.

Points to note

- For the analyses discussed in this, and subsequent chapters, we have focussed predominately on those students who were achieving in the top and bottom quartiles. Using the same method as detailed in the preceding chapter, students have been broadly categorised as either high or low achievers based on their achievement scores in Phase 4. We acknowledge that in adopting this approach we do not capture the views of around half of our students whose scores were in the middle half. However, a major focus of this study was to establish whether the transition to secondary school was a significant issue for students and whether there were differences for particular groups of students. Studies have shown that students with low achievement are less likely to remain engaged in school⁴⁵ and therefore could be considered 'at risk'. Furthermore, students who experience difficulties with their schoolwork at primary or intermediate school are thought to be more likely to find the transition problematic.⁴⁶ We therefore considered it important to focus particularly on students in the lowest achievement quartile, with emphasis on students in the highest quartile serving as a valuable point of comparison.
- The numbers of students grouped as high or low achievers in mathematics, reading and writing are small so care needs to be taken when interpreting the following results.
- In this chapter, students' attitudes towards mathematics are further analysed by whether students were high or low achievers in that subject. Students' attitudes towards reading and writing when they were in Year 8 are also analysed by whether students were high or low achievers in each of these areas. But this was not appropriate once at secondary school as reading and writing are not treated as individual subjects. Instead, for Phases 2 to 4 of the study, given that reading and writing are key elements of the English curriculum, we have examined how students felt about English as a subject by whether they were high or low achievers in reading and writing.

Students' arrival at secondary school coincides, in most cases, with students encountering a much bigger and diverse pool of students than they have been used to in their primary schools. Learning to handle the increased and more complex social interaction opportunities at secondary school is a big learning curve for many students and preoccupations with friends and peers may contribute to a decline in students' attitudes towards their schoolwork and, in turn, lowered engagement.

McGee et al (2003) note that academic achievement in the first year at secondary school is often associated with a decrease in students' interest in academic activities and a corresponding increase in non-academic activities.

We begin this chapter by examining the students' asTTle attitude scores for mathematics, reading and writing and look at how our sample of students compares to the national asTTle dataset.

⁴⁴ McGee et al (2003).

⁴⁵ Wylie et al (2006).

⁴⁶ McGee et al (2003).

We then refer to data collected during interviews with the students at each phase of the study in a discussion of the students' attitudes towards school, their teachers, and further views about mathematics, reading and writing.

To determine whether response patterns varied for different groups of students, attitudes towards school, teachers and subject areas are then further analysed by whether students were high or low achievers in each of mathematics, reading and writing.

Students' attitudes towards mathematics, reading and writing from the asTTle assessments

As part of each asTTle assessment, students were asked to complete six attitudinal questions designed to find out how much they liked a particular subject, how confident they were of their ability in that subject, and how they thought others viewed their ability⁴⁷.

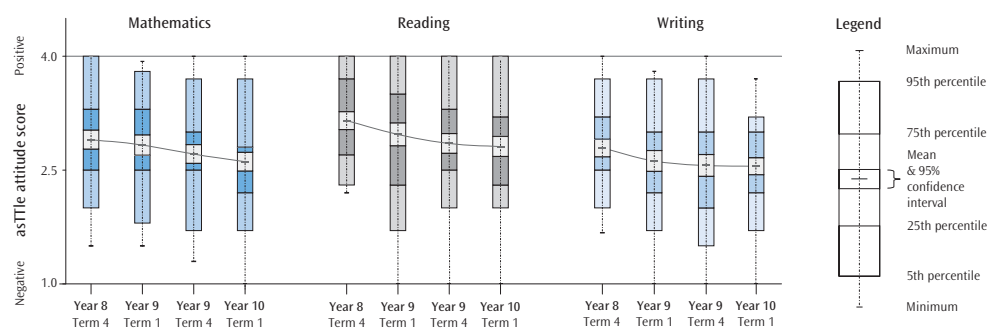
The students' attitude results from the asTTle assessments show that, generally, students in

this study had fairly positive attitudes towards mathematics, reading and writing. As can be seen in Figure 16, students liked, and were more confident in, reading than they were in mathematics and writing. Despite students having reasonably high attitudes towards all three subjects in Year 8 their attitude scores generally decreased as students progressed to Year 9 and then into Year 10.

We looked at students' attitudes towards mathematics, reading and writing for students in the top and bottom achievement quartiles for these subjects, to determine whether there was any relationship between attitude and achievement⁴⁸. We found a small but nevertheless statistically significant difference between the students who achieved in the top and bottom quartiles for mathematics and reading and their attitudes towards these two subjects indicating that the higher achieving students generally had slightly more positive attitudes than the lower achieving students. There was no statistically significant difference evident for writing.

Despite students having reasonably high attitudes towards all three subjects in Year 8 their attitudes generally decreased as they progressed through secondary school.

Figure 16: Students' attitudes towards mathematics, reading and writing



⁴⁷ Refer to Chapter 2 for more information on how students' attitudes were assessed using asTTle.

⁴⁸ Using the *t*-test for independent samples.

Comparison of students' attitude scores with the national asTTle dataset

As shown in Figure 17, students in our study generally had more positive attitudes towards mathematics, reading and writing than students in the national asTTle dataset. Our students' attitudes were, nevertheless, similar to the national sample of Years 8, 9 and 10 students in that they liked reading better and were more confident in it than they were in mathematics and writing⁴⁹.

Like the national sample, our students' attitudes towards mathematics decreased as they moved from primary to secondary school. While our students' attitudes towards reading and writing also declined as they made the transition from Year 8 to Year 9, as evidenced in Figure 17, the national asTTle results show students' attitudes generally increasing over this period. However, students in this study ended up at much the same level as the national sample by the end of Year 9.

Higher achieving students generally had slightly more positive attitudes towards mathematics and reading than the lower achieving students.

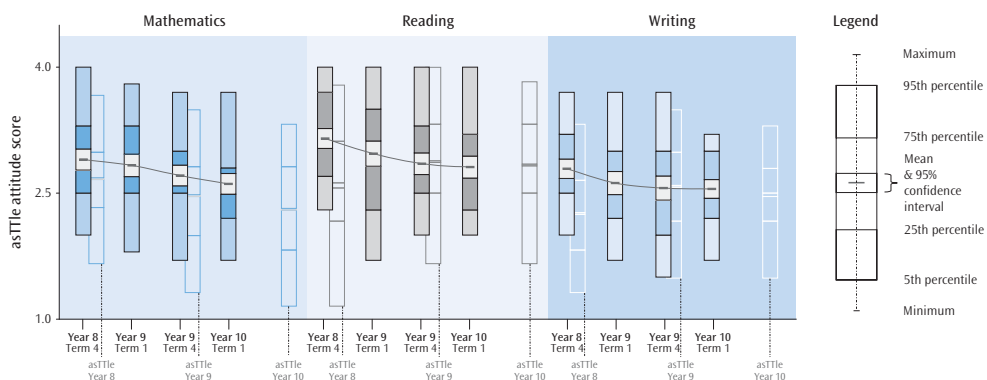
We found that the students in our study who were higher achievers in mathematics and reading had slightly more positive attitudes than the lower achieving students in these two subjects. There was no statistically significant difference evident between the high and low achievers, however, for writing.

Our attitude results for writing differ from the national asTTle data⁵⁰, which found there was a clear relationship between achievement and students' attitudes in writing, with the students who had more positive attitudes towards writing gaining higher scores.

In contrast, the national asTTle results showed little correlation between achievement levels and students' attitudes in reading.

Interestingly, students who liked mathematics the most actually achieved the lowest scores and students with medium or low liking of the subject scored at similar overall levels to one another in the national sample. But, students who had medium confidence in mathematics had slightly higher achievement than those with either high or low confidence. Results from international studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2003)⁵¹, however, have found that students who have a greater interest in and enjoyment of mathematics tend to achieve better results than those who expressed less interest and enjoyment. National results from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (1996)⁵² also show that students who like mathematics tend to have higher achievement results in this subject.

Figure 17: Students' attitudes in mathematics, reading and writing compared with the national asTTle dataset



⁴⁹ The national asTTle attitude results are presented in two parts: by how much students liked a subject and by their confidence in that particular subject. In our analyses, however, we have looked at students' overall attitudes towards their subjects.

⁵⁰ Project asTTle team (2006d).

⁵¹ PISA 2003 was the second cycle of an international study commissioned by the OECD to assess the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old students in reading literacy, mathematical literacy and science literacy. The focus of the 2003 survey was mathematical literacy. New Zealand was one of 41 participating countries.

⁵² Garden, Robert. A. (ed). (1996).

Students' attitudes towards school

As well as being interested in students' attitudes towards their school subjects which, as we have seen in the previous section, declined as students progressed from Year 8 through to Year 10, we were also interested in their views and experiences of school more generally.

Students' thoughts about going to secondary school

Prior to going to secondary school, we asked students in Year 8 if they could think of one word that described how they felt about going there the following year. Around a third of students told us that they were excited or happy about going to secondary school and that they were looking forward to new challenges, learning new subjects and meeting new people. A larger group of students (55%), however, said they were nervous, scared or even sad about moving to secondary school the following year.

The types of things they were most worried about included attending a bigger and unfamiliar school and the prospect of getting lost in this new environment, having to mix with bigger students and no longer being the oldest students in the school, the possibility of being bullied, making new friends and fitting in, coping with harder schoolwork, and adjusting to having multiple teachers. Their parents shared many of these same fears.

But the reality was that students adapted fairly quickly to finding their way around their new environment and getting used to new routines and ways of working. By the end of their first term at

secondary school, when we visited the students for the second time, almost all of them said that they now felt settled at secondary school. A large majority (79%) said it only took two weeks or less to settle in.

This, of course, is just one aspect of the situation and, while on the surface everything appeared to be fine at that point for most students, other data collected during the study suggest that there were other aspects of the transition that took some students considerably longer to get used to. The large numbers of older and bigger students, the different expectations of a range of teachers, the lack of a core class teacher in Years 9 and 10 who they felt knew them well, the different pedagogies, and the diverse and complex social interactions with both students and teachers, are just a few examples of aspects that students found much harder than they initially realised.

Students' views and experiences of school generally

To determine whether students' attitudes towards school changed over time, students were asked at each phase of the study whether, most of the time, they enjoyed going to school. As shown in Table 7, the students in our study remained much more positive than negative towards school as they progressed from primary to secondary school. While more than half of students (58%) were very positive about school in Year 8, saying they 'definitely' enjoyed it, a further third were also largely positive, giving a 'qualified yes' answer to the question, explaining that while they generally liked school there were certain aspects they did not like, or certain times when they viewed it less favourably.

Table 7: Whether students enjoyed going to school most of the time

Do you enjoy going to school most of the time?	Phase 1 %	Phase 2 %	Phase 3 %	Phase 4 %
Yes, definitely	58.0	59.6	43.0	55.4
Qualified yes	33.0	34.6	48.0	38.0
Qualified no	3.6	3.8	3.0	4.3
No, not at all	5.4	1.0	3.0	2.2
Missing	–	1.0	3.0	–
Totals	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

“I love it [being at secondary school]. I was scared to come here at first but then I didn’t see the point in being scared. ‘Cos there’s so much to do and to learn and stuff.”

(Year 9 boy)

After a term at secondary school a similar proportion (60%) of students again said they were ‘definitely’ enjoying school, with a further 35 percent saying they enjoyed school some of the time. These students said the extent of their enjoyment of school often depended on factors such as what subjects they had on a given day and whether they liked the particular teacher taking those subjects, whether there was a test planned, whether they had completed their homework on time, or whether they were feeling tired.

Although by the end of Year 9 students were still fairly positive about school, they were less likely (43%) than in the previous two phases to indicate they ‘definitely’ enjoyed school. A slightly larger proportion (48%) of students at this time gave a ‘qualified yes’ answer. This phase of data collection was undertaken towards the end of the school year and the results may, in part, be explained by the fact that the initial thrill and excitement of beginning secondary school for students had subsided and the reality of what was required from them as Year 9 students had set in.

“I get bored at home. I never want to stay home even if I’m sick. It’s good meeting with friends and I enjoy some of my subjects.”

(Year 9 boy)

Early in Year 10 the proportion of students expressing very positive attitudes towards school had increased again, with 55 percent of students indicating they ‘definitely’ enjoyed going to school. An additional 38 percent said they mostly, but not always, enjoyed school.

While, overall, there was little difference between high and low achieving students in reading and

writing in terms of whether they said they ‘definitely’ enjoyed going to school, we found that in Phases 2 and 4 (i.e. early in Years 9 and 10) the low achievers in mathematics were much more likely to say they ‘definitely’ enjoyed going to school than the high achievers. The high achievers were more likely during these phases to give a ‘qualified yes’ answer.

Very few students at each phase indicated they did not like going to school at all, but of those who did, almost all were achieving in the bottom quartile in mathematics, reading or writing in Phase 4 of the study (i.e. they were the students we have categorised as ‘low achievers’ for the purposes of this report). The reasons they did not enjoy school included that they did not like their current school or their teachers or that they just found school boring.

“It’s boring, some subjects are boring. I really like my options. I would rather be doing hands-on stuff like motor mechanics.”

What students enjoyed about being at school

The social dimension of school life appeared to be an important influence on how many students felt about school. One of the main things that students consistently said they enjoyed about coming to school was being able to see their friends there. Students also enjoyed learning new and challenging things and mentioned that they were enjoying specific subjects. Some mentioned that particular

teachers made learning fun, while still others said that it was good to be at school because it gave them the opportunity to play different sports or that they would get bored if they had to stay at home rather than come to school.

Students' attitudes towards their teachers

Students often have quite different feelings about their various teachers, which may impact on how much they like particular subjects and how engaged they feel in those classes. Research shows that what students think about a subject is often dictated, to a large extent, by their feelings about the teacher taking the subject.⁵³ For this reason, we sought students' views about their teachers at each phase of the study.

Students' views about their teachers generally

Students were asked to indicate how they felt about their teachers by choosing one of a number of statements we read out to them during the interviews at each phase. Table 8 provides details

of the statements students could choose from and how they responded. In Phase 1 (Year 8), students' responses focussed on their main classroom teacher, whereas in subsequent phases at secondary school, students were asked to think more generally about how they mostly felt about the teachers they had.

As shown in Table 8, the students (in Phases 2, 3 and 4) were less positive about their teachers at secondary school than they had been in Year 8. This may in part be explained by the fact that students were having to adjust to different teachers and teaching approaches at secondary school and were developing different feelings towards their different teachers. And perhaps, too, it was partly as a result of now having to give an overall rating for several teachers rather than just one as in Phase 1.

Over a third (36%) of Year 8 students said they liked their teacher very much, compared with only 15 percent of students in Phase 2 and eight percent of students in each of Phases 3 and 4. Despite this trend, students at secondary school tended to be much more positive than negative about their teachers generally.

"When you like the teacher the subject is not an effort. I hated maths last year because I didn't like the teacher. This year, I really like maths because I really like the teacher."
(Year 9 girl)

Table 8: How students felt about their teachers

	Phase 1 %	Phase 2 %	Phase 3 %	Phase 4 %
I like my teacher(s) very much	35.7	15.4	8.0	7.6
I mostly like my teacher(s)	30.4	37.5	24.0	31.5
Sometimes I like my teacher(s) and sometimes I don't	27.7	37.5	54.0	52.2
I don't like my teacher(s) much	1.8	–	4.0	4.3
I don't like my teacher(s) at all	1.8	1.0	1.0	–
I haven't really thought about it	2.7	7.7	7.0	4.3
I'm not sure	–	1.0	–	–
Missing	–	–	2.0	–
Totals	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

⁵³ McGee et al (2003).

Students told us over the course of the study that they felt more engaged and enjoyed their classes more when they felt their teachers listened to them, had a sense of humour, clearly explained things and helped them to understand their work, made boring things interesting and taught them new things. Students also appreciated it when they felt teachers understood them, could relate well to teenagers, showed they cared and had respect for them and showed they liked teaching and were interested in the subjects they taught.

Students were more positive about their English teachers than they were about their mathematics teachers.

Students' views about their English and mathematics teachers at secondary school

In Phases 3 and 4 students were also asked to specifically rate how they felt about their English and mathematics teachers. We found that students were more positive about their English teachers than they were about their mathematics teachers. Over half (59%) of students at the end of Year 9 said they had either an excellent (25%) or good (34%) relationship with their English teacher compared with 46 percent of students who described their relationship with their mathematics teacher in the same ways (21%, 25% respectively).

By Year 10 (Phase 4), students rated both their English and mathematics teachers more positively than they had in the previous phase. Sixty-nine percent of students now described their relationship with their English teacher as excellent (34%) or good (35%) and 61 percent also indicated that their relationship with their mathematics teacher was excellent (22%) or good (39%). To some extent the trend evident in Phase 3 was still apparent, in that the students were more likely to attribute the 'excellent' rating to their English teacher than to their mathematics teacher.

Fewer students in Year 10, compared with Year 9, said their relationship with their mathematics teacher was not very good (8% compared with 17%) or not good at all (2% and 6%).

Some of the high achieving students had 'outgrown' primary school and were ready to move on to secondary school.

Differences in the views of low and high achieving students about their teachers overall

When we examined whether the low and high achieving students felt differently about their teachers at different phases of the study we found in Phase 1 that it was the low achievers in mathematics (13 out of 25) and reading (13 out of 26) who were more likely than the high achievers in mathematics (5 out of 19) and reading (4 out of 21) to indicate that they liked their Year 8 teacher very much.

It may be that when they were in Year 8 the low achieving students were continuing to enjoy the nurturing environment of primary school and that when they moved to secondary school they suffered more than other students at the loss of the more personalised attention they had been used to. From our interviews with students, it was obvious that a number of the high achievers had 'out-grown' primary school and were ready to move on to secondary school.

The majority of the high achieving students tended to be more conservative in their views, saying that they mostly liked their teacher (8 out of 19) or that sometimes they liked them but at other times they did not (7 out of 19). However, the low achievers in writing (4 out of 21) were less likely than their counterparts in mathematics and reading to say they liked their Year 8 teacher very much.

Very few students in Phase 1 said they did not like their teachers at all (refer to Table 8). While none of the students who were low achievers in mathematics, reading or writing answered in this way, one student who achieved highly in mathematics, reading and writing indicated she did not like her teacher at all in Year 8. The brief profile of Nicola⁵⁴, which follows, illustrates some of the challenges teachers face in engaging students who enjoy being 'difficult' in class, as well as the definite views students have regarding some of their teachers.

⁵⁴ This is not the student's real name (nor is it the name of any other student in our study).

Nicola

Nicola enjoyed most things about school in Year 8, that is, apart from her class teacher. She felt her teacher was too strict and she did not like the fact that they were not allowed to talk in class and had to do a lot of written work. A 'good teacher', she said, would make boring things interesting, would play games in class and vary the lessons, and not make the students sit quietly and write in their books all the time.

Nicola acknowledged, however, that she did not always behave well in class for her teacher:

"The teacher always calls my mum and gives me a detention. Sometimes I do stuff to make her angry and sometimes she just gets angry, even when I haven't done anything."

Her Year 8 teacher noted that Nicola had become part of a rebellious peer group, which enjoyed being defiant and pushing boundaries. Nevertheless, her teacher felt Nicola had the ability to achieve well at school, if she put her mind to it.

Once at secondary school Nicola became more positive about her teachers overall, indicating that she liked them some of the time. She did not, however, like her mathematics teacher very much in Year 9 or Year 10, despite achieving well in this subject. She felt he growled at her, and the class, too often.

Information supplied by her Year 9 mathematics teacher, on the other hand, indicated that Nicola was continuing to be disruptive in class and that she did not always achieve as well as she could due to her off-task behaviour. He felt her friends had a negative impact on her behaviour in class and warned that:

"[Nicola] has displayed some leadership skills but if she pushes boundaries she may end up in poor company in Year 10."

Despite her often disruptive behaviour, Nicola was a relatively high achiever, consistently achieving in the top quartile for reading over the course of the study, as well as in the top quartile for mathematics in Phases 2 and 4 and for writing in Phases 3 and 4.

In Year 9 (Phases 2 and 3), the high achieving students in reading and writing were more positive about their teachers generally than the low achievers in these two areas.

But a different pattern was evident for mathematics. In Phase 2, the low achievers in mathematics were, again, more likely than the high achievers to indicate liking their teachers very much, although to a much lesser extent than in the previous phase. However, similar proportions of low and high achievers in mathematics were positive about their teachers when we added together the two most positive ratings.

Towards the end of Year 9, both the high and the low achieving students in mathematics were less positive about their teachers generally, with none of these students saying they liked their teachers

very much⁵⁵, and slightly fewer students than in the previous phase indicating they mostly liked them.

By Year 10, similar proportions of high and low achievers in mathematics, reading and writing were positive about their teachers, each group stating that they either liked them very much or that they liked them most of the time (around 57% in each case for mathematics, 48% in reading, and 45% in writing).

When students were asked in Phase 2 whether they had different feelings about different teachers it was the high achieving, rather than low achieving, students who were more likely to indicate 'yes definitely' or 'yes, quite a bit'. This was particularly the case for students who were achieving in the top quartile for mathematics. One possible explanation may be that the high achieving students were more discriminating in terms of their teachers' skills as a teacher.

Despite earlier variations, once they were in Year 10, similar proportions of high and low achievers in mathematics, reading and writing were positive about their teachers.

⁵⁵ Although eight percent of students indicated they liked their teachers very much (Table 8), these students were achieving in the middle half of all students in mathematics, rather than in either the top or the bottom quartiles on which this discussion is based.

High achieving students tended to discriminate more between teachers.

The students who were high achievers in mathematics were more likely than the low achievers in this subject to describe their relationship with their mathematics teacher in Year 9 as excellent or good. Likewise, the high achievers in reading and writing were more likely to feel they had an excellent or good relationship with their English teacher than the low achievers in Phase 3, and again in Phase 4. In Year 10, similar proportions of high and low achieving students in mathematics indicated they had an excellent or good relationship with their mathematics teacher.

Students' attitudes towards mathematics from their interview data⁵⁶

To further our understanding of the factors that may impact on students' achievement, motivation levels and how well they engage in school and particular subjects, students were asked at each phase of the study to nominate the subjects they liked learning about best and the subjects they felt they were good at.⁵⁷ In addition, from Phase 2 onwards, students were asked which subjects they liked least. We have used this information to look further, in this section, at students' attitudes towards mathematics.

Students liked mathematics more at primary school than they did at secondary school.

As can be seen in Table 9, students were much more positive about mathematics in Year 8 (61%) than they were in subsequent phases of the study. In Phase 1, just under half (48%) of students also felt that mathematics was one of the subjects they were best at.

High achievers were aware mathematics was a subject they were good at, despite often saying they liked it least.

Around three-quarters (15 out of 19) of the high achieving students in mathematics nominated mathematics as one of the subjects they liked best

in Year 8. A similar number (14 out of 19) of these students also considered they were good at this subject. Interestingly, a significant number (16 out of 25) of the low achieving students also said they liked learning about mathematics best. They were, however, less likely to think they were good at it (10 out of 25).

By early in Year 9 (Phase 2), there was a drop in the number of students who advised that they liked mathematics best (36%) and also a drop in the number who thought they were good at it (39%), although this was a smaller drop. Around a third of students (32%) now also mentioned that mathematics was one of their least favourite subjects.⁵⁸

The students in the lowest achievement quartile were more likely (12 out of 25) than their high achieving counterparts (5 out of 19) to mention enjoying mathematics best at this phase, whereas the high achieving students were more likely (11 out of 19) to mention liking mathematics least. Despite this, the high achieving students were more likely to know they were good at mathematics.

How students felt about their mathematics teachers appeared to influence how they felt about this subject.

At the beginning of Year 9, the low achieving students were more likely to say they liked mathematics best because they had good teachers who helped them to understand new things. They also said they found mathematics interesting and felt it was an important subject to learn.

The high achievers, on the other hand, were more likely to say that they liked mathematics best when they were learning new things or simply because they found the subject easy.

Table 9: Students' views on mathematics

	Phase 1 %	Phase 2 %	Phase 3 %	Phase 4 %
Students who liked mathematics best	60.7	35.6	47.0	27.2
Students who felt they were good at mathematics	48.2	39.4	44.0	32.6
Students who liked mathematics least	Not asked	31.7	36.0	37.0

⁵⁶ That is, as distinct from their aSTtle attitude results.

⁵⁷ These were open-ended questions (free response), which meant that students' responses were unprompted. Students could indicate more than one subject.

⁵⁸ This question was not asked in Phase 1.

In terms of why students liked mathematics least, both the high and low achieving students mentioned that they did not like the teaching approach of their particular teacher and that they found them either unhelpful, too strict or just “*too boring*”. While a number of the high achievers were finding the work in Year 9 too easy and felt they were repeating work from the previous year, other high achievers were finding the work too hard.

Nevertheless, students generally appeared to be more positive about mathematics by the end of Year 9 (Phase 3). A greater proportion (47%) of students mentioned liking mathematics best at this time and also considered they were good at it (44%). We found that around two-thirds of the high achieving students (12 out of 19) now said that mathematics was one of the subjects they liked best and also thought they were good at, compared with around a third of the low achieving students (8 out of 25) who said they liked mathematics best.

But early in Year 10 (Phase 4), there was once again a drop in the number of students (27%) who mentioned liking mathematics best. Fewer higher achieving students (6 out of 19) now mentioned liking mathematics best or that they thought they were good at it (9 out of 19), while the number of low achieving students who said they liked mathematics best was similar to the previous phase (7 out of 25).

Proportionally more high achievers (7 out of 19) than low achievers (7 out of 25) said they liked mathematics least.

Summary of students’ views about mathematics

Students’ spontaneous responses to the question regarding the subjects they liked best showed that their enjoyment of mathematics fluctuated as they moved from primary to secondary schooling (detailed in Table 9).

Students’ liking of mathematics decreased noticeably over the transition to secondary school (between Phase 1 and Phase 2), improved moderately by the end of Year 9 (Phase 3), but then dropped again as

they moved from Year 9 to Year 10. These results follow a similar pattern to our student achievement data in mathematics over this period (refer to Figure 1 in Chapter 3).

Even though a large number of the low achieving students in mathematics said that mathematics was one of the subjects they liked best in Phase 1, the proportion of the students mentioning mathematics decreased progressively at each phase.

In contrast, the high achieving students’ liking of mathematics fluctuated from Phase 1 to Phase 4 (79%, 26%, 63%, 31% respectively), dropping markedly as they transitioned from Year 8 to Year 9 and, again, from Year 9 to Year 10. While a number of the high achieving students mentioned liking mathematics least once they were at secondary school, they were, nevertheless, aware that it was a subject that they were good at.

National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP)⁵⁹ findings also show a drop in students’ attitudes towards mathematics as they progress through school. Year 8 students were found to be less positive about mathematics than Year 4 students.

Students’ attitudes towards reading and English from their interview data

The Competent Children, Competent Learners study⁶⁰ found that one of the strongest indicators of positive engagement in school and learning was the enjoyment of reading. The results from that study also show that students who enjoyed reading had more positive relationships with their family and friends and displayed less risky behaviour. Furthermore, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2000)⁶¹ found that the students who had a greater interest in reading generally achieved better results than those who had less interest.

As a way of examining these issues more closely, our next case study, at the end of this section, features Liam⁶², one of the students from our study who loved reading,

The proportion of low achievers who liked mathematics best progressively decreased at each phase.

Previous studies have found the enjoyment of reading to be a key indicator of students’ competency levels and engagement in learning.

⁵⁹ Crooks, T. & Flockton, L. (2002).

⁶⁰ Wylie et al (2006).

⁶¹ Refer to footnote 38 for details about PISA 2000.

⁶² This is not the student’s real name (nor is it the name of any other student in our study). As well as the name change, we have altered certain identifying details about the student in the interests of preserving anonymity.

Whether students enjoyed reading in their spare time

The majority of students in Year 8 said they enjoyed reading.

Over the course of the study students were asked a number of questions about their reading habits. One of the questions they were asked at the end of Year 8 was whether they liked to read for their own enjoyment or interest when they were not at school. The majority of students (83%) at that time told us they enjoyed reading. The types of things they enjoyed reading most were fiction books (58%) and magazines (46%). Around a quarter of students also said they enjoyed reading other material such as newspapers and non-fiction, as well as doing word puzzles or crosswords.

High achieving students in reading typically had more books in their homes and read more for fun or interest.

We found that the high achieving students in reading (17 out of 21) were more likely than the low achieving students (12 out of 26) to indicate they would read for fun or interest in their spare time when they were not at school (in Phase 1). The high achieving students also had access to a greater number of books in their homes than the low achieving students.

By the end of Year 9, however, considerably fewer students (55%) in our study said they enjoyed reading when they were not at school. Twenty-nine percent of students said they 'definitely' enjoyed reading, with 26 percent giving a 'qualified yes' answer to the question. This decline in students' attitudes towards reading is consistent with the students' asTTle results from the study reported earlier in this chapter, which show a decline in students' attitudes towards reading from Phase 1 to Phase 4.

Students' comments about reading in their spare time were consistent with their asTTle attitude results and other research, such as NEMP.

Information collected from the National Education Monitoring Project (2004) also reveals that students' enjoyment of reading in their leisure time decreases as they move through the school system. Eighty-two percent of students in that project were positive about reading in Year 4 compared with 73 percent in Year 8.

Other studies show similar trends. For example, despite their overall attitudes towards reading being somewhat higher than those of students in our study, students participating in the Competent Children, Competent Learners study showed a decline in their attitudes towards reading from age 12 when they were at primary school (64% indicated they enjoyed reading at that time) to age 14 when they were at secondary school (54%). A further quarter of students in each case at ages 12 and 14 of the Competent Children, Competent Learners study indicated that they 'sometimes' enjoyed reading.

How often students read when not at school

During Phases 2 and 4 students were asked to indicate how often they engaged in a range of activities in their spare time when they were not at school. One of the activities they were asked about was 'reading for fun or interest'. Despite the notable decline in students' attitudes towards reading over the course of the study, which we have discussed above, their responses to this question in Year 9, and again in Year 10, show that students were continuing to read with similar frequency in Year 10 as they had been twelve months earlier (Table 10).

However, it is important to note that while 15 percent of students in both Year 9 and Year 10 were reading every, or almost every day, a greater number of students were reading very infrequently (i.e. 'less than one day a week' or 'never or almost never') over the same period. Not surprisingly, given other information collected from this study, the low achieving students in reading were twice as likely as the high achievers in both Phases 2 and 4 to read infrequently.

Table 10: How often students indicated they read for fun or interest when they were not at school

How often students read for fun/interest	Phase 2 %	Phase 4 %
Every/almost every day	15.4	15.2
Three to five days a week	27.9	25.0
One to two days a week	27.9	31.5
Less than one day a week	17.3	16.3
Never or almost never	9.6	12.0
Missing	1.9	–
Totals	100.0	100.0

How high and low achieving students felt about reading when in Year 8

In Phase 1, 48 percent of students told us that they liked reading as one of their favourite subjects. Similar proportions of low achieving (12 out of 26) and high achieving (9 out of 21) students mentioned that they liked reading best at this time. However, only a third of all students nominated reading as something they were 'best at', with high achievers much more likely to say they were good at it (10 out of 21) compared with the low achievers (3 out of 26).

How high and low achieving students in reading felt about English at secondary school

Once at secondary school, students talked about English as a subject, rather than reading per se, as they had when in Year 8. In the following analyses we compare students' achievement in reading with how they felt about English as a subject at secondary school (Phases 2, 3 and 4 of the study) to see whether there appeared to be any relationship between the two.

In Phase 2, early in their first term at secondary school, 39 percent of all students mentioned English as one of their favourite subjects. Around half (10 out of 21) of the high achievers mentioned liking English best, with just slightly fewer (12 out of 26) of the low achievers also liking English. Although one fifth of all students mentioned English as their least favourite subject, more low achievers in reading said

that English was their least liked subject. The low achievers were also slightly less likely to think they were good at English.

While a greater proportion (46%) of all students nominated English as one of their 'best liked' subjects at the end of Year 9 (Phase 3) compared to earlier in the year, proportionally more low achieving students in reading now indicated liking the subject best (18 out of 26) when compared with high achieving students (9 out of 21). Similarly, there was an equivalent pattern evident for those students who considered they were good at English (11 out of 26 and 7 out of 21 respectively).

However, as found in Phase 2, low achieving students in reading were nevertheless more likely than high achieving students to mention English as their least favourite subject.

By Phase 4, the low and high achieving students had reversed their views from the previous phase. The high achieving students were now more likely (13 out of 21) to mention English as their favourite subject and to consider they were good at it (8 out of 21) than the low achievers (9 out of 26 and 6 out of 26 respectively). The low achievers were, again, more likely than the high achievers to mention English as one of their least favourite subjects.

Summary of students' views about reading and English

Although we found there was a drop in the proportion of students who said they 'definitely' enjoyed reading when not at school from the end of Year 8 to the end of Year 9, just over 70 percent of all students in Years 9 and 10 indicated they would read for fun or interest at least one to two days a week, and often more frequently (refer to Table 10). The high achieving students, however, were generally reading for fun or interest more frequently than the low achieving students. This was particularly the case in Phase 4.

Over the course of the study, students were less likely to vary their opinions of whether they liked reading or English as one of their favourite subjects, compared with their opinions of mathematics. While there was a drop in the proportion of students who mentioned liking English best over the transition into Year 9, and again over the transition into Year 10, these were not as marked as the percentage changes evident for mathematics over the same

period. There were also decreases in the proportion of students who felt they were good at English over these two transitions. It is important to remember at this point, however, that reading at primary school and English as a subject at secondary school are not directly comparable.

In general, students were more likely to say that they liked reading (in Year 8) or English (in Years 9 and 10) than they were to consider that they were good at them.

We found that the students who we grouped as high achievers in reading were more likely than the low achievers to say they liked English best and to consider they were good at it in Phase 4 (early in Year 10). The low achieving students were also more likely to mention this as a subject they enjoyed best and were good at in Phase 3 (end of Year 9). However, at the same time, in Phases 2, 3 and 4, the low achievers in reading were also more likely than the high achievers to mention English as their least favourite subject.⁶³

On the whole, students showed more stable attitudes towards reading/English over time than they did about mathematics.

Liam

Both national and international research has found that students who enjoy reading generally achieve better results at school. In this case study, we look more closely at some of the characteristics of one of the students from our study who loved reading.

Liam really enjoyed reading and read whenever he could in his spare time. He rarely watched television, DVDs or videos, or played electronic games. He was a relatively high achiever at school and continued to make good academic progress over the transition from primary to secondary school.

Liam consistently mentioned reading and writing as his favourite subjects at primary and secondary school and he achieved well above the mean in these areas on the asTTle assessments we administered. His attitude towards reading, assessed prior to each asTTle assessment, also remained consistently positive over the course of the study. His attitude towards writing was positive as well but not as positive as his attitude towards reading. At secondary school, he also enjoyed doing art and science and, along with English, thought he was 'best' at these subjects.

While he was mostly positive about going to school and clearly articulated why, at times, Liam did not enjoy certain aspects of being there. Mathematics and PE were two subjects he consistently said he did not like over the course of the study. Despite not liking mathematics, however, Liam's asTTle mathematics results were always above the group mean, scoring in the middle half of students in Phases 1, 2 and 4 and in the top quartile in Phase 3.

⁶³ Students were not asked about their least favourite subject in Phase 1 of the study.

Liam – *continued*

He thought that listening well to his teachers, paying attention in class and being able to remember things helped him to be ‘good at learning’. In Year 10, he also mentioned that he enjoyed working quietly by himself and did not like group work very much.

Liam had one or two close friends at school who shared his interests in reading and drama. He felt he could trust them, talk to them if he had a problem and that they would not encourage him to do stupid things. He did not, however, see them very often outside of school hours. The fact that Liam was involved in a number of out-of-school activities that took up much of his spare time probably had a significant impact on his opportunity to socialise with friends.

Liam had been bullied in Year 8 (where he had been described as something of a “loner” as he did not fit in with the predominant peer group), which he reported to the teacher. He also told us about instances of being teased and called names at the beginning of Year 9. But he didn’t seem overly concerned by this and said he just ignored the remarks. He did not report being bullied when we asked him again in Phase 3 and Phase 4.

Prior to going to secondary school Liam said he was both excited and apprehensive. He was looking forward to the greater variety of subjects there and the extra-curricular activities he could become involved in. By early in Year 10 he was participating in the choir, debating team, and the school production. Liam’s parents commented that they were happy that he was getting involved in extra-curricular activities at school:

“It is fantastic for Liam to get involved in the wider opportunities at school, to see school isn’t just about classes.”

Liam’s views of his teachers

Liam spoke positively about his Year 8 teacher and said he liked him most of the time. Although sometimes strict Liam liked the way the teacher varied the work, made the lessons interesting, and tried not to repeat topics the class had already completed.

After a term at secondary school Liam said he liked his new teachers. He particularly liked them when they spoke nicely to him, helped him when he was unsure about things and treated students fairly.

“The teachers [here] like what they teach so they care whether you learn it, rather than having one teacher try to teach everything [like at primary school]. They try quite hard to make it clear so we learn.”

He did not, however, like it when teachers got angry and yelled at the class or made them sit and write pages of notes, which he said was “really boring”.

Liam thought his teachers had high expectations of him because he was in a high ability class and the teachers knew the standard of work the students in his class were capable of achieving.

By the end of Year 9, Liam’s opinion of his teachers varied. While he felt he got on well with his English teacher he felt that his relationship with his mathematics teacher was just ‘OK’. He thought this was mainly because he often found mathematics boring.

Liam – *continued*

Teachers' views of Liam

Liam's teachers were fairly consistent in their assessments of him over the course of the study.

His Year 8 teacher at primary school assessed Liam's progress in reading and writing as 'very good/excellent' and considered that literacy was the subject area that Liam liked best and did his best in. The teacher also referred to Liam's dislike of PE (see earlier). This same teacher described Liam's ability as 'above average' and judged him to have made very good progress during the year. He felt that Liam was capable of gaining a tertiary diploma in the future.

After almost a term at secondary school, his Year 9 form teacher felt that Liam had settled very well at secondary school and described both his work effort and his academic progress as 'excellent'.

Towards the end of Year 9, Liam's form teacher and his English and mathematics teachers all agreed that he had made very good progress during his first year at secondary school. His achievement in English was considered to be 'very good to excellent', while in mathematics it was described as 'average but very good in some aspects'. All three teachers felt that Liam enjoyed school very much, tried hard to do his best at his schoolwork, and engaged well in activities beyond the classroom. They felt he was capable of achieving either an undergraduate or a postgraduate university degree after leaving school.

In Year 10, Liam's form teacher continued to indicate that he was getting on very well and making excellent academic progress:

"All staff find him positive, cooperative and conscientious."

His teachers at secondary school were very supportive of his participation in the school's extra-curricular activities, particularly the school production. His form teacher in Year 10 considered that he had become more self-confident as a result of his role in the production. And a particularly positive outcome for him was the positive attention that he now received from other students as a result of his performance.

Over the course of the study, Liam's teachers indicated that he did not mix with students who were anti-social or caused trouble and that he was rarely influenced by peer pressure to do something out of character.

Liam's relationship with his family

It was obvious from the consistency of Liam's answers about his relationship with his parents that he lived in a caring environment where he felt safe and supported and could tell his parents when things were bothering him. His parents were aware of the bullying he had experienced in Year 8 and Year 9.

Liam's parents had not thought he would cope very well with the transition to secondary school, mainly because they felt he was often not well-organised and did not take responsibility for himself (as at the end of Year 8). However, early in Year 9, they reported they were very satisfied with his progress and felt Liam was getting on 'extremely well':

"He is industrious about completing homework, showing and telling us about his work. He is achieving well in tests, which is boosting his confidence in his own ability."

They continued to be very satisfied with his progress at the end of Year 9, and again in Year 10, and considered he was getting on 'very well' at school. Feedback from Liam's parents showed a high level of agreement with what his teachers said about him over the course of the study. Liam's teachers, in both Year 8 and Year 9, considered that his parent's were very supportive of him.

Liam – *continued*

What was the transition to secondary school like for Liam?

Liam could have potentially found the move from primary school to secondary school difficult. At the end of Year 8 he seemed neither mature enough nor emotionally ready to make this transition. He was a quiet boy who spent much of his spare time at school reading by himself and did not have like-minded friends at primary school.

However, in many ways Liam made a smooth transition to secondary school. He adapted to the new routines and took up opportunities to engage in the wider life of his new school, and in doing so gained the respect of his teachers and other students.

Although he had endured some bullying in Year 8 and early in Year 9, he found his own ways to cope with this and by the end of Year 9 reported no further instances of bullying to us.

Liam was focussed on his studies and his teachers were very satisfied with the progress he was making at secondary school. Results from our aSTLe assessments also show that he was continuing to achieve well in mathematics, reading and writing, despite mathematics being one of his least favourite subjects.

When we asked Liam at the end of Year 9 what he felt had helped him settle in at secondary school he mentioned that he found having Year 13 students as peer supporters attend his form class particularly good. He also said that knowing older students who already attended the school, as well as having people he knew from primary school there, made the transition easier.

Further transition activities which Liam took part in while he was in Year 8 to help familiarise him with his new school and learn about what to expect when he arrived there, were spending a morning looking around the secondary school, going with his parents to meet the principal, and the secondary school principal and Year 9 Dean making a visit to his primary school to provide information and answer students' questions. Of particular help to Liam at the beginning of Year 9, in terms of finding his way around, was being given a map of the school grounds and buildings.

Other factors which may have helped ease the transition to secondary school for Liam were: that he was positive about school and learning and had favourite subjects which he enjoyed, in particular reading and writing; he participated in a range of extra-curricular activities, both at, and outside of, school through which he gained confidence and found a special niche for himself at the school; he liked his teachers and appreciated that they expected him to do well; he did not associate with students who caused trouble at school; and his parents were supportive and encouraging, particularly in relation to his extra-curricular involvement.

Students' attitudes towards writing and English from their interview data

Writing plays a significant role in most school subjects and being able to express their views in an effective and articulate manner is essential if students are to successfully progress through the school system and beyond. We were particularly interested in finding out what students thought

about writing and, in particular, whether students enjoyed writing outside of school time.

Whether students enjoyed writing

During the students' interviews in Phases 1 and 3, students were asked whether they enjoyed writing. Just over half (53%) of students in Phase 1 said they 'definitely' enjoyed writing, with a further 18 percent giving a 'qualified yes' answer.

"[Writing] gives me sore fingers. I'd rather be doing other things".
(Year 9 boy)

But by the end of their first year at secondary school (Phase 3) students were less positive about writing, with just 21 percent saying they 'definitely' enjoyed writing and 27 percent saying they only enjoyed it 'sometimes'.

Girls (29%) were slightly more likely than boys (23%) to indicate 'definitely' enjoying writing in Phase 1, with the boys more likely to say that they did not enjoy it (19% boys, 10% girls). Interestingly, when they were asked the same question in Phase 3, similar proportions of boys and girls were extremely positive about writing, although the overall proportions of students indicating they 'definitely' enjoyed writing had decreased (11% of boys and 10% of girls).

Compared to mathematics and reading, students were much less likely to mention that they liked writing or were good at it.

Some students, particularly boys, did not like writing because they found it physically difficult and they found the amount of writing and copying work required at secondary school challenging, saying amongst other things that it was 'hard to keep up'.

The downward trend in students' attitudes towards writing is consistent with the information collected through our asTTle assessments, which show a decline in attitudes towards writing from Year 8 to Year 10.

Results from the age 14 phase of the Competent Children, Competent Learners study⁶⁴ also show a drop in students' attitudes towards writing from when they were interviewed in primary school compared with similar information provided by them at secondary school.

"I get bored very easily when I write. It's hard for me to do descriptive stuff. I run out of steam and inspiration."
(Year 9 boy)

At age 12, half of the students said they enjoyed writing but this figure dropped to 37 percent two years later at age 14. Although we are unable to compare our results directly with the data from the Competent Children, Competent Learners study⁶⁵ due to the timing of our respective data collections it is evident from both studies that students' enjoyment of writing tends to decline once they are at secondary school.

The National Education Monitoring Project⁶⁶ reports a decrease in students' attitudes towards writing at an even earlier age. They found that, compared to Year 4 students, fewer Year 8 students were highly positive about writing either at school or in their own time. They also found that students' positive beliefs about how good they were at writing, and about how their teachers and parents viewed their writing abilities, declined.

How high and low achieving students felt about writing when in Year 8

When we looked at the information collected during the student interviews on which subjects students liked best and least, and also thought they were good at in Year 8, we found that, in line with the results from our asTTle assessments and other data collected, students were less likely to mention liking writing as one of their favourite subjects (34%) than they were to mention mathematics (61%) and reading (48%). They were also less likely to say they were good at writing (24%), compared with mathematics (48%) and reading (33%).

Not surprisingly, the students who were low achievers⁶⁷ in writing were less likely than the high achieving students⁶⁸ to mention writing as a subject they liked best (3 out of 21) or thought they were good at (2 out of 21) in Year 8. Seven of the 19 high achievers said they liked writing best, with the same number also considering that it was one of the subjects they were good at.

How high and low achieving students in writing felt about English at secondary school

As was the case with reading, once at secondary school students talked about English as a subject rather than writing specifically, as they had at primary school. In the following analyses we look at students' achievement in writing compared with how they felt about English in Years 9 and 10.

⁶⁴ Wylie, C. & Hipkins, R. (2006).

⁶⁵ Information for the Transition Study was collected at four specific times over 18 months, irrespective of the age of the students taking part at that particular time (although of course all students in our study were approximately the same age – 12 or 13 years old at the outset of the study). Information for the Competent Children, Competent Learners study, on the other hand, is age-specific, with data being collected from students when they reach a certain age. When data were collected at age 14, a third of participating students were in Year 9 and two-thirds were in Year 10. More information on Competent Children, Competent Learners is available from: <http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/homepages/competent-children/index.html>

⁶⁶ Crooks, T. & Flockton, L. (2007).

⁶⁷ Students who were achieving in the bottom quartile in Phase 4 for writing.

⁶⁸ Students who were achieving in the top quartile in Phase 4 for writing.

Being a high or low achiever in writing appeared to have little bearing on whether students mentioned English as one of the subjects they liked best early in Year 9. Similar proportions of low (9 out of 21) and high (8 out of 19) achieving students in writing said that English was one of the subjects they liked best. While slightly more low achieving students considered they were good at English than liked it, the proportion of high achieving students who thought they were good at English was the same as the proportion who mentioned liking it best. Only a few of the high (3 out of 19) and low (2 out of 21) achievers said they liked English least at the beginning of Year 9.

Towards the end of Year 9, just under half (9 out of 19) of the high achieving students in writing said they liked English best, with slightly fewer telling us they felt they were good at it. In addition, a third of low achieving students (7 out of 21) said English was one of their best subjects, as well as one of the subjects they felt they were good at it. The lower achieving students were more likely, than in the previous phase, to now mention liking English least.

By early in Year 10, the proportion of high achieving students (10 out of 19) who said they liked English best was similar to that in Phase 2, but there was a slight increase in the number of low achieving students (10 out of 21). There was very little change from the previous phase in the proportions of low and high achieving students who liked English least and those who thought they were good at it.

Summary of students' views about writing and English

Information from our student interviews and the asTTle assessments shows a decreasing trend in students' attitudes towards writing as they progressed through school, which is also in line with the results from other New Zealand studies such as Competent Children, Competent Learners and the National Education Monitoring Project. Students generally were less likely to mention writing as one of their favourite subjects in Year 8, with the low achievers less likely than the high achievers to mention it as a subject they liked or thought they were good at in Year 8.

However, being a low achiever in writing did not appear to necessarily impact on the way these students felt about English as a subject at secondary school. A significant proportion of low achievers in writing said English was one of their 'best liked' subjects in Phases 2, 3, and 4 (43%, 33% and 48% respectively). They specifically mentioned that they had good teachers and that they enjoyed the activities and topics they were learning about. In Phase 2, over half of the low achieving students considered they were also good at English.

Summary of trends in students' attitudes over the transition and beyond

Both national and international research indicates that students' attitudes towards school and to particular subjects decrease as they progress through the school system. From our interviews with students, it was clear that students were much more positive about mathematics, reading and writing in Year 8 than they were in Years 9 and 10. Attitude data collected at the beginning of each asTTle assessment also show a general downward trend in students' attitudes towards these subjects as they progress through school.

Nevertheless, across all phases of the study, the majority of our students remained reasonably positive about going to school, saying that they 'definitely' enjoyed going to school most of the time or giving a 'qualified yes' answer.

Although very few students at each phase indicated they did not like going to school, it is of note that they were primarily students achieving in the bottom achievement quartile in mathematics, reading or writing in Phase 4 (i.e. low achieving students), highlighting the particular 'at risk' status of these students.

Teachers clearly have an impact on how students feel about particular subjects and students acknowledged that they felt differently about their various teachers. Our findings are in line with those from the Competent Learners @ 16 study (Wylie et al, 2008), which found that students displayed different attitudes in their different classes.

Students were much more positive about mathematics, reading and writing in Year 8 than they were in Years 9 and 10.

Confirming results from other studies, information from our student interviews and asTTle assessments show a trend for students' attitudes towards writing to become increasingly negative as they progressed through school.

Students were less positive about their teachers at secondary school than they were about their teachers in Year 8. In saying that, students at secondary school were still much more positive than negative in their views about their teachers overall.

Early in Year 9, the high achieving students were more likely than the low achieving students to be more discriminating about particular teachers, and their perceived strengths and weaknesses. This was especially the case for students who were high achievers in mathematics.

In Year 8, it was the low achievers in mathematics and reading who were more likely than the high achievers to say that they liked their teachers very much. The high achieving students tended to be more forthright about what they liked, and did not like, about their Year 8 teachers, perhaps indicating they were not being as challenged as much as they would like and were impatient to move on to secondary school.

At secondary school, students were generally more positive about their English teachers than they were about their mathematics teachers. However, in Year 9, it was the high achievers in mathematics, reading and writing who were more likely than the low achievers in these subjects to describe their relationship with their mathematics and English teachers as excellent or good. This was also the case in Year 10 for the high achievers in reading and writing.

“I like English. [It’s] not just reading comprehension. It’s more the type of English I like – studying an author or book, reading and writing poetry. More in-depth stuff.”
(Year 9 girl)

One possible explanation for the low achieving students being less positive about their teachers at secondary school than they were about their Year 8 teacher may be that they were still finding it harder than other students to adjust to having different teachers for different subjects and, in particular, missing the more nurturing environment of primary school where they were likely to have had a more personal relationship with their teacher.

Despite being less positive about their relationship with their English teacher in Phase 3, the low

achieving students in reading (in Phase 3) were more likely than the high achievers to say they enjoyed English as one of their favourite subjects, and also considered they were good at it. However, by early in Year 10 (Phase 4), the situation had reversed, with the high achievers in reading now more likely to say they liked English best, as well as considering themselves to be good at it.

The Competent Children, Competent Learners research has identified enjoyment of reading as a key indicator of engagement in school and learning⁶⁹. In Year 8, the majority of our students told us they enjoyed reading when they were not at school and although their overall attitudes to reading declined over the course of the study, around 40 percent of students in Years 9 and 10 were continuing to read for fun or interest on a very regular basis (either almost every day or around three to five days a week). But at the other end of the scale, it was of concern to see that around 10 percent of students scarcely read at all if not required to do so in the course of their schoolwork.

The extent of students’ engagement in their learning at secondary school is one important issue to emerge from this study. Our data⁷⁰ indicate that students were often unhappy about certain aspects of what and how they were learning in class, which contributed to their lowered engagement in the classroom. There was also considerable evidence to show that disruptive/off-task behaviour in class (either their own and/or that of their classmates) was often a significant barrier to learning. Students’ behaviour in class may be one indication of how engaged they are in their learning or how well they are coping with it, with a subsequent likely impact on their levels of achievement. Although we have not discussed student behaviour in depth in this report it is nevertheless an important issue and will be covered more fully in the third report from the Transition Study: *Easing the Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling: A Resource Document*.

⁶⁹ Wylie et al (2006).

⁷⁰ Engagement at school and student behaviour are also discussed in Chapter 14 and throughout the second report from the Transition Study: *The Case of Emily: A Focus on Students as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling*.