

Orientation to School

The previous chapter discussed a number of student qualities to do with being a learner — behaviours, competencies, views — that are not necessarily shaped by school experiences, but are likely to be important when looking at how successful a student may be in their learning at school. This chapter continues the focus on important ingredients for learning by considering student views and behaviours in relation to requirements and opportunities for learning specifically within the context of school.

The chapter begins by looking at the nature and extent of student engagement in the wider life of the school, followed by discussion, with the spotlight continuing to be on Emily, of student behaviour in class, attendance at school, and attitudes and behaviour in respect of homework.

Engagement with School

Participation in the Wider Life of the School

In Year 8, Emily participated in and enjoyed a range of extra-curricular activities.

Other studies referred to in the transition literature review by McGee et al⁴¹ reveal that participation in the wider life of the school — by taking part in extra-curricular activities, for example — can be an important factor in how well students engage with learning. As well, it can be important for fostering a sense of belonging and commitment to the school they are attending, the degree to which students successfully participate in social networks, and how well they are likely to cope with important changes, such as going from primary to secondary schooling.

She was finding it difficult to juggle extra-curricular activities and other responsibilities.

Emily's responses over the course of the study to questions about extra-curricular activities show that she both participated in and enjoyed such activities. But it was also evident by the end of her first year at secondary school that she was finding it more difficult to balance these 'extra things' with her schoolwork and other responsibilities than she had a year, or even several months, earlier. Emily did however anticipate that she would be comfortable about becoming more involved in extra-curricular activities again as a Year 10 student, because she expected to be well used to secondary school by then. A more detailed account of Emily's extra-curricular involvement follows.

The extra-curricular activities that Emily took part in when she was in Year 8 included a school drama production, an inter-school performing arts

competition, Australian maths competition, and a number of sports tournaments involving other schools.

Once at secondary school, Emily joined a school group that was to perform at a local summertime music and arts festival, joined the school's cultural group for Māori and Pasifika and other interested students, and tried out for a school netball team and "made it in". Emily selected these activities because:

"They're things I used to do and things I like doing and was hoping I'd get into [when I came to this school]. My friends are in these things too."

Asked about any 'special responsibilities' at school in Phase 2, Emily advised that she had been nominated by her classmates for a Year 9 student council representative position and had taken up the opportunity.

By the end of Year 9, however, while Emily had continued to play netball for the school in season she no longer attended the cultural group, had chosen not to take part in 'Stage Challenge'⁴², and had not been actively involved in her role as student council representative. Emily explained that her decreased rate of involvement in extra-curricular activities as her first year at secondary school progressed was not due to lack of interest but because she...

"...wanted to settle in [properly] — will do [these things] next year when I'm settled in."

Emily's parents, and also her teachers before and after transition, confirmed that Emily had taken part in sports and extra-curricular performing arts activities. They had no concerns about her willingness to participate in such activities. To the contrary, Emily's parents commented in Phase 3:

"It's been great to see her take part and try new things. We are happy with the tasks she has set for herself."

⁴¹ See p.12 for details about this review.

⁴² 'Stage Challenge' is a performing arts competition between secondary (and sometimes intermediate) schools; competition heats are held regionally, and finalists from each region then compete nationally. Each participating school writes and produces its own short musical, and all those who perform are students from the school in question. One of the aims of the competition is for each school to include as many of its students as possible in some capacity, from stage design to acting, singing or dancing on stage.

Emily's prediction in Phase 3 that she would become more involved in extra-curricular activities again in Year 10 proved to be the case. During her Phase 4 interview Emily said that already that year she had been heavily involved in a school production. She had also joined a choir group, taken part in a sports tournament, been part of a group representing the school in a music and arts festival and, in contrast to the previous year, was intending to become involved in Stage Challenge.

Emily expressed a high level of enjoyment about everything she was taking part in, apart from feeling *"a bit pressured"* in some of her subject areas because she had had to miss classes in order to attend rehearsals.

As well as her extra-curricular involvement, Emily had once more been elected by her classmates to be *"back-up to the student council rep for my form class"*.

Behaviour in Class

As a 'measure' of a student's engagement in school, as well as to provide an indication of the nature of student–teacher relations (Chapter Eight has more on this), we asked participating students how they would *mostly* describe their behaviour in class.

In Phase 1 Emily considered that she was somewhere between 'about average' and 'not very well behaved' in class. She explained that this was because...

"...[I] get in trouble for talking — practically every day."

Quite probably, this behaviour is indicative of a student who not only felt relaxed and 'at home' at the primary school she had attended throughout her primary schooling, but was also ready to move on to new challenges.

In contrast to her Phase 1 response, it is noteworthy that Emily rated her behaviour in class much more positively early in her first year at secondary school, now describing herself as 'very well behaved'. However, near the end of Year 9, she was rating her behaviour as 'about average'.

Emily did not offer explanations, but her ratings suggest perhaps that she was careful to behave well in class while she was still getting used to everything in her new school. And that once she was familiar with routines, procedures and people, and had a greater understanding of what was expected of her in her schoolwork, she felt able to relax more and be herself. Conversely, or as well, it could be that in certain contexts or classes, Emily no longer felt motivated to behave as well as she had earlier in the year.

Emily considered that she was 'very well behaved' in class, in her first term in Year 10, which is how she rated herself at the equivalent time the previous year. However, on the basis of feedback about Emily's overall development over the course of the study, it is likely that the reasons for this at each stage were different. That is, while Emily's good behaviour in class early in Year 9 was probably at least partly to do with her still getting used to a new situation, once she was in Year 10, it was more probably a case of Emily being serious enough about her studies to want to be on task in class as much as possible.

Parent perspective on Emily's behaviour in class

By also asking parents to comment on their child's behaviour in class we wanted to see the degree to which their perspectives coincided with those of their child and their child's teachers.⁴³ The particular question was 'As far as you know, which of the following⁴⁴ best describes your Year 8 [Year 9] child's behaviour in class this year?' In Phase 1, Emily's parents estimated their daughter's in-class behaviour to be 'about average — about the same as everyone else in class'. Once more showing they were well informed about and in tune with Emily, they added that:

"A lot of her problem was too much talking, distracting other students."

The next year, Emily's parents again rated Emily's behaviour in class as being 'about average', but this time without adding a comment.

Emily increased her level of extra-curricular involvement in Year 10.

"I get in trouble for talking, practically every day."

In Year 10, Emily described herself as 'very well behaved' in class.

⁴³ For teacher ratings of Emily's behaviour in class, see Chapter Eight.

⁴⁴ Parents had the following response categories to choose from: 'Very well behaved'; 'Well behaved'; 'About average (ie, about the same as everyone else in the class)'; 'Not very well behaved'; 'Very badly behaved/she [or he] causes problems in class'; 'Don't know'.

All Students

Their participation in the wider life of the school

We asked students at each phase of the study if they had ‘taken part in any extra things/activities at school (so far) that year’. In Phase 1, 89 percent of the then Year 8 students answered ‘yes’. The proportion answering ‘yes’ dropped to 69 percent in Phase 2, but rose again in Phases 3 and 4 (to 76% and 78% respectively), although not to the pre-transition level.

The reasons most often given by students who had not taken part in any school-based extra-curricular activities were:

- that they weren’t interested in any of the activities on offer or ‘couldn’t be bothered’;
 - *“My laziness, just feel tired.”*
 - *“Nothing interests me so far.”*
- not knowing what was available or not knowing how to go about joining up — this was particularly evident in Phase 2, as was the comment from a number of students that they wanted to settle into their new school before taking on extra things;
 - *“I play netball but haven’t joined in the [school production or cultural activities] because I wanted to settle into school this year and do those things next year.”*
 - *“Because it’s my first year [at secondary school] — I thought I’d just get to know people first.”*
 - *“Too shy: would like to join basketball or hockey but there were no girls trying out for basketball and I missed out on hockey because we [class] were on a school trip. Will maybe try next year.”*
 - *“Wanted to play netball but was too late to get in a team ’cause I didn’t know where to join up.”*
- being unable to stay after school (living too far away, being restricted by limited travel options, being required at home);
 - *“I get a taxi home and I’d miss the taxi home [if I stayed to do extra-curricular activities].”*
 - *“Don’t know which bus to catch home [if I stayed later], have to get used to first-year routines before joining anything.”*
- having competing sports (not school-based) or other commitments after school;
 - *“I play rugby for a club, not at school. I have settled in at the club already so don’t want to play it at school. Don’t want to do any of the other activities — too shy.”*
 - *“Because I’m busy with ATC. And also the stress of homework this year.”*
- not joining because friends didn’t want to;
 - *“Because of my friends — they don’t want me to go there [ie, join up for extra-curricular activities] and if I do, they think I might like them [the other participants] better than them. I would like to participate in sports.”*
 - *“My friends don’t want to join extra activity clubs.”*
- health reasons (including sports injuries).
 - *“I can’t play sports for medical reasons.”*

There were also a few students who said that while they hadn’t yet taken part in any activities, they intended to, for example, when the season began for the particular sport they were interested in. And one or two students in Year 8 said they hadn’t been at the school long and didn’t yet know how or what to join.

The extra-curricular activities that students had participated in at school covered a wide range, including: sports (soccer, rugby, hockey, badminton, netball, softball, cricket, swimming, athletics, volleyball, touch rugby, cross-country); languages; chess; kapa haka; Pasifika cultural groups; extension art; science fair; English

continued...

All Students

Their participation in the wider life of the school – continued

or mathematics competitions and/or extension classes; school and/or inter-school concerts or productions; dance; and music (including barbershop quartet, choir, bands); speech competitions or debating.

Of those who had taken part in activities, almost all expressed very positive views about their participation. They mentioned enjoying or appreciating: the opportunity to do activities in the company of their friends; meeting new people; gaining confidence; receiving recognition from others for achieving well; having a chance to take on a leadership role; being part of a team; having the opportunity to stretch themselves by doing something new; finding that an activity they thought would be of no interest was worthwhile and enjoyable after all; being able to build on personal hobbies or interests; and taking pride in representing the school. Examples of the comments that they made follow.

- *“Enjoy it [sports] because I’m good at it, and people encourage me to do it because they know I’ve got the talent. I say ‘I can’t do it’ but they say I can so I try it and find out that I can.”*
- *“Yes, because there are many varieties of activities that you don’t usually do outside of school.”*
- *“Get to meet other people from school.”*
- *“It’s cool. Once you do well in that sport you get a good feeling inside.”*
- *“I like dancing, it’s one of my hobbies. Drama is like acting out another person. And I like sports.”*
- *“You can hang out with your friends and they [extra-curricular activities] are just fun. I liked the colours in the art. I like making nice pictures and seeing other people’s too.”*
- *“I love sports and when you go to play in the champions you make new friends. I enjoy playing for the school and I do it for fun.”*
- *“It was cool [being in the inter-school performing arts competition]: gain confidence in front of a big crowd. Felt proud — we had a good enough skit (came second, nearly first). I enjoyed it all except the early practices — at 8.15am — had to get up 15 minutes earlier.”*
- *“Cause it’s fun and you get competition with other students.”*
- *“Enjoyed all of it. At first it is shame [ie, embarrassing performing in front of others] but you get used to it.”*
- *“Basketball was good because I was the vice captain.”*
- *“I love kapa haka because I enjoy learning my culture.”*
- *“Enjoy it [debating]. Pretty good at arguing — come up with good points. And I like doing props for Stage Challenge.”*
- *“It was good, something different. I wouldn’t have thought I would be interested in something like that.”*
- *“I really enjoy them all. I just wanted to be involved with the school more. And I make friends there too.”*
- *“Team sports I really like. And Project K — gives me experiences I haven’t had before.”*
- *“Yes, enjoy it, except that I’m feeling a bit pressured with my work because I’ve had to take four or five days off school for the rehearsals so have a bit to catch up on.”*
- *“Chess, it’s pretty good. It makes you think of strategies. Most people just rush into things but chess makes you think of consequences. And I also like the people in the chess club.”*

However, there were a small number of students who were dissatisfied in some way with the activity they had chosen or did not feel welcome or part of things.

- *“I’m in the band, but I don’t like it all the time, don’t like some of the music. Would be better if you could choose.”*
- *“Kapa haka stopped being fun because some people didn’t like me and I kept being put to the end of the line. I stopped last term.”*

All Students

Special responsibilities at school

Because students in Year 8 often spontaneously included ‘special responsibilities’ at school in their references to participation in extra-curricular activities — such as peer mediation, road patrol, library duties, helping younger students with their reading or other work, and being a team leader — we included the question ‘Do you have any special responsibilities at school so far this year?’ in each of Phases 2–4.

Just under a fifth of students in Phase 2, and slightly more in Phase 3, indicated that they had special responsibilities at school, but these figures are a little inflated given that quite a few of these students included ‘runner’ duties (taking messages from the office to teachers and students in classrooms around the school), which aren’t really what we intended by ‘special responsibilities’, as all Year 9 students were rostered to take their turn at doing this once or twice during the year. However some students variously mentioned that they had been elected by classmates to represent them on student council, that they helped out in the library or school canteen, were captaining a sports team, and in the case of one student, helping to organise the kapa haka group.

By Phase 4, almost a quarter of students stated they had special responsibilities at school, most often citing involvement around student council, sports teams, and the library (but no longer including runner duties as ‘special responsibilities’).

An additional question to students who had not undertaken special responsibilities at secondary school was whether they would have *liked* to have done so. In Year 9, especially in the first part of the year, most students were happy not to have extra responsibilities because they felt they needed a chance to settle into secondary school first:

- “I decided to settle in first before jumping into anything.”
- “Wouldn’t want more responsibilities this year, too hard to fit it all in.”

Some Year 9 students felt too that ‘special responsibilities’ at secondary school were really just for ‘the older kids’. And in the case of a few students, it was because they preferred not to stand out: “*Just want to be part of the normal class.*”

But as the students became more used to secondary school, an increasing number, particularly when they reached Year 10, expressed an interest in taking on some sort of ‘role of responsibility’, such as the opportunity to become captain of a cricket or rugby team, or similar. Some explained that taking on special responsibilities would allow them to get more involved in things at school, meet more people, develop more skills, and simply give them more challenges, satisfaction and enjoyment, as many had found when they undertook such duties as a Year 8 student.

All Students

Self-ratings of behaviour in class

According to the data in the table, students were more likely to describe themselves as ‘well behaved’ or ‘very well behaved’ early in the school year (Phases 2 and 4) than they were later in the school year (Phases 1 and 3).

Overall, it seemed that more disruptive classroom behaviours were most likely to occur towards the end of the students’ first year at secondary school.

By contrast, in Phase 4, more students seemed to be generally well behaved in class, with no student reporting themselves as ‘not very well behaved’.

	Phase 1 %	Phase 2 %	Phase 3 %	Phase 4 %
Very well behaved	21	24	12	9
Well behaved	29	36	32	48
About average (eg, about the same as everyone else in the class) ^a	48	37	49	43
Not very well behaved	3	3	4	–
Very badly behaved/I cause a lot of problems in class	–	1	1	–
Missing data	–	–	2	–

^a On reflection, this response category may not have been as useful or discriminating as we’d hoped. For example, behaving ‘about the same as everyone else in the class’ could mean very different things to individual students, depending on the overall nature of the class(es) they happened to be in. It is possible therefore that the present results give a slightly more favourable overall picture of student behaviour than might have been the reality, especially in light of the many reported complaints from students about the disruptive behaviours of classmates (as well as acknowledgements, quite often, of their own off-task behaviours in class). And of course teachers are likely to have a different perspective again.

Comments, by study phase, from students who described themselves as not very well behaved included the following.

Phase 1

- “I like talking.”
- “I’m always in trouble — for not doing work, or not getting it finished on time.”
- “Talk a lot — can’t stop talking in silent reading [and at other times].”
- “I get high in the afternoon because I eat too much sweets in the morning.”
- “Yell at the teacher, make fun of her, ‘cause I don’t like her.” [This student was reacting to a change of teacher part way through the school year; she had particularly liked her previous teacher.]
- “I get on with my work but when I start to talk to my friends I don’t finish it.”
- “My friends mostly talk to me and I tell them to ‘Sh-sh’ so I can do some work.”

continued...

All Students

Self-ratings of behaviour in class – continued

Phase 2

- “I don’t really like the teachers much. Talking when the teacher is talking, walking round the classroom and being told to sit down.”
- “I talk a lot and laugh a lot and don’t get my work done.”
- **“Classes are boring so I talk to my mates and disrupt the class. If classes were more interesting I would get on with my work.”*
- “Talk too much, flick rubber bands around, walk around out of our desks. We fight too much in class — the teacher tells us to stop. It’s the effect from last year — where bad people were having fights.”

Phase 3

- “I don’t want to [behave well] because it’s boring — stop listening and try to [annoy] the teacher.”
- **“I talk too much (can’t handle the silence). Work is boring — if work wasn’t boring, I wouldn’t talk in class.”*
- “Sometimes I answer back the teachers. Get detention, referred out of class. Happens once a week.”

Phase 4

It is notable that the student who had consistently rated himself as badly behaved in class in the previous three phases (his comments are preceded by an asterisk) no longer did so in Phase 4, suggesting that the strategies the school had put in place for this student were having a positive effect and he was coping better at school. (This student was described by his teachers as a boy with learning, behaviour and social difficulties — not helped by other students deliberately stirring him up, to which he tended to respond in inappropriate ways — but also as a ‘lovable rascal’ whom one couldn’t help but like.)

Attendance at School

Emily was always keen to come to school.

Our inclusion of interview questions concerning days absent from school was primarily to assess whether students sometimes stayed away from school because they felt disengaged from school for any reason. Questions about attendance at classes and preparedness for class were asked for the same reason.

In Phases 1 and 3, Emily’s parents reported that Emily ‘hardly ever’ had days off school, confirming what Emily herself said at each phase of the study. In particular, Emily did not want to miss school because she was always so eager to catch up on the news with her friends.

Throughout the study Emily always answered “Yes, every day” when asked if she arrived at school on time most days, adding that she was “never late”.

Class Attendance and being Prepared for Class

As well as being on time for school, Emily asserted that she had ‘all the things she needed for class (*eg, pens, calculator, things for technology class, gym gear, etc*) with her most days’, an answer which corresponded with her Years 8 and 9 teachers’ assessment of this aspect of Emily’s behaviour.

We did not specifically ask Emily whether she turned up to her *classes* on time, but according to her Year 9 and Year 10 teachers, occasionally she did not. These teachers also rated Emily as being occasionally absent from class. However, with what we know about Emily from other information collected, these findings were almost certainly largely to do with her involvement in extra-curricular school activities, and not because she was reluctant to attend classes or tardy for no good reason.

All Students

Whether they arrived at school on time

At each phase of the study students were asked 'Do you get to school on time most days?' Any student who answered 'no' was asked for reasons.

The data showed that at least 90 percent of students at each phase indicated that they generally arrived at school on time. Students were least likely in Phases 1 and 4 (3% and 2%) to say they were sometimes or more regularly late for school than they were in either Phase 2 (11%) or Phase 3 (7%).

During Year 9 in particular, a reason given by about half of these students for arriving late was that the bus, or the family member who gave them a ride to school, was late: *"Brother who gives me a ride is usually late so often 5–10 minutes late. Sometimes it's embarrassing."* Other explanations given by tardy students at each phase were that they slept in, their mother slept in and didn't get them up in time, *"I take too long to eat breakfast — Mum gets angry"*, and, in the case of two students, that they had a range of home responsibilities to deal with before school: *"Have to get my younger sisters ready for school."*

Whether they came prepared for class

A frustration frequently expressed by teachers is that at least some students often arrive in class without all the tools they need for their work, which is disruptive for the rest of the class, and can significantly reduce effective learning time. Such behaviour can also be an indicator of less positive student attitudes towards school. To explore this issue we put to students the question 'Do you have all the things you need for class (eg, pens, calculator, things for technology class, gym gear, etc) with you most days?'

Although the great majority of students at each phase were of the opinion that they mostly brought along what they needed for their classes, students were most likely to admit that they did not when they were in Year 8 (12% answered 'no' to the question in Phase 1). By contrast, only four percent of students answered 'no' in Phase 2, suggesting that they were taking particular care to come prepared to classes in their early weeks at secondary school. However, by the end of Year 9, nine percent of students stated that they quite often did not bring everything that they needed; the situation was much the same early in Year 10, with 10 percent of students saying this.

Most often, the students' reasons for failing to bring pens, calculator, gym gear, etc, with them to class were that their belongings had been stolen by other students or not been returned by the people to whom they had been loaned, that they simply forgot, or that some equipment had broken or been damaged. One student stated in Year 9 that she 'couldn't be bothered' carrying a bag of books and other equipment around all day, and another blamed his mother: *"My Mum clears out my bag and takes everything out."*

A teacher perspective on this and related issues, such as behaviour in class, is provided in the third report on our transition study.

Homework: Experiences and Attitudes

The student interviews included a series of questions about ‘homework’.⁴⁵ According to the transitions research literature, homework can be an important factor in how students view their schooling experience, especially when they have quite different experiences of it before and after the Year 8 to Year 9 transition. Attitudes to homework may also constitute another measure of a student’s engagement in school, interest in or commitment to learning, and how they link learning at school to learning in a much broader life context.

She found it difficult balancing assignment deadlines from different teachers.

Frequency of Homework

In Phase 1, Emily advised that her teacher gave out homework for the whole week “*every Monday*”, with the expectation that students handed in their completed work on Friday of the same week.⁴⁶ This happened most weeks; students were occasionally exempted from homework if a special event was scheduled, such as a school production or inter-school sports tournament.

Homework was helpful for building on what she had worked on in class.

A few weeks after transition (Phase 2), Emily advised that while she did not necessarily receive homework every school day, there was usually something to be completed for about three of her subject areas each week. The task set could either be to do with ongoing project work or an assignment. Homework was not set in every subject area — for instance, at this stage, Emily was not being given homework for technology or for art (“*except maybe just finishing off stuff*”). She most often had homework in English, social studies, mathematics and science.

Students were not asked about the frequency with which they were given homework in Phase 3 but in Phase 4 Emily had this to say about ‘how often’ she had been getting homework so far that year:

“Not much at all this term — way less than last year. Only had one assignment [so far] this year.”

The Amount and Difficulty Level of Homework

Amount of homework

At each phase of the study, students commented on how they felt about the *amount* and *level of difficulty* of the homework they received.

In Phases 1 and 2, Emily considered that the amount of homework she received was ‘just right’. In Phase 1, Emily added “*I like it [my homework].*”

But when in Phase 3 Emily rated the amount of homework received as ‘too much’, this appeared to be more a matter of the timing of homework from different subject teachers rather than quantity per se:

“Like [it’s hard] when three assignments all come at once.”

Early in Year 10, however, Emily now considered that the amount of homework she was receiving was...

“...just right, considering all the extra-curricular activities I’ve been doing this term, otherwise [the amount of homework] would be too little.”

Difficulty level of homework

Throughout the study Emily reported that homework was neither too easy nor too difficult for her — ‘most of it is just right’. This finding fits with other information from Emily: that she seldom needed to seek help with her homework, and that she felt her homework assignments helped her revise and build on what she had done in class. Emily also felt that completing her homework showed that she was capable of working and learning effectively and independently.

Time spent on homework

Although it perhaps sounds unlikely, in Phase 1 Emily considered that she was spending around eight hours each week on her homework. A few weeks after her transition to secondary school, Emily’s response was that...

“...it depends— some weeks more than others. [But usually spend] about 30 minutes a day.”

⁴⁵ It is noteworthy that various data collected over the course of the study show ‘homework’ to be a topic on which opinion is often divided: across schools, among teachers in the same school, among parents, and among students.

⁴⁶ It was evident from teacher interview data that, in this case, frequency of homework was school policy, rather than specific to individual teachers or to individual students.

Towards the end of Year 9, Emily seemed to have established a homework routine for herself. In relation to how much time she spent on homework each week she stated:

“Same every day — one hour. Don’t like the idea of failing.”

However, in Phase 4, Emily estimated that she was currently spending only about 30 minutes a week on homework; this was because her teachers had so far given out very few homework assignments.

Emily’s feedback at different phases of the study suggest that she may perhaps have devoted more time to homework in Year 8 (to ‘fun projects’, possibly simply because she enjoyed it, whereas once at secondary school her reasons for completing it were more serious: that she recognised the need to revise in order to get on and not fall behind. In particular, she had a desire to ‘prove herself’ and do well.

Emily recognised that good homework habits would help her do well and achieve her aims.

Luke on homework

In Year 8, Luke felt that homework ‘matters’ because you *“need it to learn —and you can’t cover everything in class”*.

However, Luke seldom liked doing his homework and although eventually *“it gets done every week”* he often found it hard to complete *“because of sport after school most days”*. He added that he ‘sometimes’ needed help with homework and that his parents and grandparents helped him when necessary. They also regularly checked that he had completed his homework.

In his first term at secondary school, Luke considered the amount of homework received was bordering on ‘too much’. He quite often found it difficult to get his homework done mainly because *“I just don’t get down to it, get distracted easily”* but also because as well as just not enjoying doing it, overall (some he found too easy) he was finding quite a bit of his homework to be more difficult or challenging than he had in Year 8 and now only ‘usually’ rather than ‘always’ completed it. Nevertheless he continued to feel that homework ‘matters’ because *“You need to do it or you’ll get detention. [And it] helps with learning, learning new stuff.”*

His attitudes towards homework remained much the same towards the end of Year 9, although he seemed to be spending a little longer on it — about two hours a week — than he had earlier in the year. He again rated homework as mattering, this time *“because you’re going to have to do it [ie, be organised, meet deadlines, do self-directed study] someday so it’s best to practise doing it, to get used to it.”* But despite his forward thinking, Luke still said he ‘sometimes’ found it hard to get his homework done because he had...

“...other things to do — computer and TV distract me. And it’s hard to balance everything when things [assignments and other responsibilities] come at once.”

He also ‘never or hardly ever’ liked doing his homework.

In his first term in Year 10, Luke spent around three hours a week on homework. He was generally feeling more positive about it than he had previously, saying that the amount and difficulty levels were mostly ‘just right’ and that he ‘sometimes’ liked doing his homework, a considerable contrast to the previous year when he said he ‘never or hardly ever’ enjoyed doing it. As well, Luke once more said that homework ‘matters’ in order *“to do well”*.

Feedback from Luke’s mother at different points of the study confirmed that ‘homework’ was one of the least favourite aspects of school for her son, both before and after transition. Her particular view was that Luke found it difficult for two reasons: sometimes because he found the tasks difficult, but more often because he did not always like working hard and particularly did not like ‘having to be organised’ and take responsibility for having all the right books and so on at the right time.

All Students

Views on amount of homework received

For many students, being asked whether the amount of time they have to spend on homework is too much or too little is likely to evoke an ‘emotional’, rather than an objective, response. Bearing this in mind, we found that students’ answers varied considerably: that is, some students who said they were only doing 5 to 10 minutes homework a day were also likely to say this was ‘too much’, whereas some other students who felt they were doing several hours homework a week considered this as ‘just right’.

Students often reported receiving very different amounts of homework. Undoubtedly, in large part, this was because students were in several different classes, and therefore likely to have been assigned varying amounts of homework by their particular teachers, especially when students were working at different ability/achievement levels. However, in the case of some students at least, ‘frequency’ and/or ‘amount’ may have been more a *perception* than a reality.

But whatever students’ perceptions were regarding amount of homework, the data in the table show that the proportion saying they were receiving ‘too much’ homework rose sharply following transition and remained at much the same elevated level through into Phase 4.

But rather than ‘amount’ per se, quite often a greater concern for students, especially by Phase 3 of the study (although decreasing again in Phase 4), was that of balancing the timelines for multiple homework tasks from different teachers:

- “Sometimes it’s too much: when assignments all come at one time. When it’s periodically, it’s OK.”
- “Too much homework when you have two or three assignments at once.”
- “Sometimes can be heaps of homework assignments at once and then we have none.”
- “Assignments from different teachers come at the same time and there’s much more [homework] than last year. Not used to it, [although] it’s easier now than it was at the beginning of the year.”

View on amount of homework received	Phase 1 %	Phase 2 %	Phase 3 %	Phase 4 %
Too much	4	31	27	26
Just right	80	56	51	60
Too little	11	6	9	5
Don’t know/haven’t thought about it	2	2	2	2
Some other response ^a	–	5	9	7
Missing data	3	–	2	–

^a ‘Other responses’ included: “Between ‘too much’ and ‘just right’. At times too much (mainly when there are clashes in [due dates for assignments] and at times ‘just right’; ‘Could be more’; ‘Less than I would have expected’; ‘Seems to be too much because of moving house’; ‘The assignments are big’; ‘Just right, even though it’s a lot more than last year.’”

How difficult they found their homework

As already mentioned under views on amount of homework, once students reached secondary school, the biggest challenge for most students in relation to homework was not so much the amount or its difficulty level, but the fact that they had to plan for and manage deadlines, and adapt to different expectations, when receiving homework assignments from a number of teachers:

– *“Having timetable clashes for homework sometimes is tricky.”*

View of difficulty level of homework	Phase 1 %	Phase 2 %	Phase 3 %	Phase 4 %
Most of it is too easy	10	7	5	4
Most of it is just right	76	71	73	80
Most of it is too hard	5	7	6	7
Don't know/haven't thought about it	1	3	4	4
Some other response ^a	8	11	9	4
Missing data	1	1	3	–

^a ‘Other responses’ included: *“Sometimes too hard, sometimes too easy; “Sometimes too hard, sometimes just right”; “Depends on which subject”.*

However, for a small but important number of students, it was evident that they struggled with the homework they were given, sometimes taking several hours to complete homework that other students probably completed quite quickly, turning it into an ordeal for the student and often his or her parents as well:

“Homework, it sucks, it takes me hours, and it hurts my hand doing all the writing.”

And this student's parent commented:

“Homework is a difficulty, it's a real struggle every time to get [him] to do it. He's so slow at it, it really drags things out but it's important for his learning, so he doesn't fall too far behind.”

All Students

Views on the importance of homework

While at each phase of the study a large proportion of students rated homework as (most of the time) either 'very important' or that 'it matters', scrutiny of the comments that accompanied their ratings showed that students often had quite different sorts of reasons for considering homework to be important.

Some students, for example, rated homework as mattering because it:

- helped them revise and remember work they had done in class;
 - *"It helps your education: you can practise what you've learned."*
 - *"Because it's revision of what you have learned. Helps you get to know the subject better."*
 - *"Re-learning things we have done, testing ourselves."*
- extended their learning;
 - *"Important for our education. If we don't do these things we won't get ahead in life."*
 - *"It helps you learn. You find out things. It gets your brain working — that extends your thinking."*
 - *"It matters heaps. I like getting good reports. And it helps with learning."*
 - *"So the teachers can find out what you need to know and what you've already learned."*
 - *"So you learn; would rather do homework than not do it."*
- helped them prepare for assessments (several students in Year 10 and even in Year 9 made particular reference to the need to think ahead to NCEA);
 - *"Prepare for the tests."*
 - *"To get us used to studying for NCEA — so we get into the habit of doing it."*
 - *"To prepare for NCEA in two years. For revision."*
 - *"It goes towards your year's marks; gets you into a good routine for NCEA."*
- demonstrated that learning does not just occur at school;
 - *"So you get to learn at home too. And so you can get used to it and learn to plan, then it will be better when you grow up. [Getting it done] depends on how you plan your day, put yourself out."*
 - *"So I can learn at home as well as at school."*
 - *"Because it helps me achieve work outside of school and gives me a bit more time to think about what I'm writing down."*
- helped them learn how to plan and organise themselves (which they felt were particularly important skills for their future career and other goals).
 - *"So you can get ready for college, learn to hand stuff in on time."*
 - *"When you grow up you might have 'due dates' for assignments or essays so it helps you get used to organising yourself."*

Importance of homework	Phase 1 %	Phase 2 %	Phase 3 %	Phase 4 %
Very important	54	67	43	57
It matters	31	25	42	33
Not important	6	3	5	4
Don't know/haven't thought about it	2	2	5	2
Depends	5	–	3	4
Missing data	1	3	2	–

continued...

All Students

Views on the importance of homework – continued

Other students, however, and considerably more frequently once they were in Years 9 and 10 compared to Year 8, regarded homework as mattering because on the one hand they had been told by their school/teachers that completing homework was one of the criteria by which they were assessed for 'graduation' into Year 10...

- *"I don't want to stay behind and be a Year 9 again."*
- *"Marks will fall if I don't do it [homework]. Falling behind in college is one of the worst things."*

...and on the other hand was a way of avoiding 'getting into trouble' with their teachers — receiving after-school detention or being required to stay in class during lunch break to finish their homework, or making their parents angry, should the school ring or send a letter home to say that they were not doing homework:

- *"Because if we don't, we get in trouble and I don't like getting in trouble. Have to finish off homework at school and if we don't we get lines or have to run."*

And in quite a number of cases, students gave both views: that doing homework helped their learning and also helped them avoid negative consequences.

- *"Get punished if homework is not finished, have to stay in over lunchtime to complete it. It improves learning."*
- *"Because this year there is a system of having to graduate to Year 10: having to complete homework is one criterion [for graduation]. It helps me learn too."*

Other reasons students gave for considering that homework matters were that: it gave them something constructive to do at home when there was nothing else that seemed appealing; it taught them to take responsibility; helped with getting parents involved in what they were doing; made them feel good when they pleased teachers and/or parents by doing well on their homework tasks; and because they just enjoyed doing it.

- *"Cause you've got to learn responsibilities and stuff like that, and it helps your learning."*
- *"Like doing the work and like to make teachers happy."*
- *"When I've got nothing to do I can just pull it [homework] out and do it."*
- *"Revision of what you do in school helps my learning. Helps to build up relationship with family — getting them to help."*
- *"Because you've got to do it yourself, without the teacher's help."*
- *"It matters usually. But it depends on whether you are good at schoolwork. I like homework 'cause sometimes there's nothing to do at home and homework is an alternative. Homework is maybe just to help you catch up — sometimes if people fall behind in class, people can catch up by doing homework (doesn't really happen to me though)."*
- *"It's a responsibility — set by teacher, should do it. Makes you keep up with other kids. Important for learning."*
- *"Teaches us life skills, responsibility to complete tasks."*

As a more general comment, students sometimes commented too on the nature of the homework received, and/or that their feelings about homework depended on which subject area it related to.

continued...

All Students

Views on the importance of homework – continued

Students preferred homework:

- targeted to their needs, rather than just a broad task or worksheet given out to the whole class ‘for the sake of it’;
- they could see would advance their understanding and skills in a particular area;
- that would help them revise for a particular test; or
- that would help them practise and therefore better retain new concepts so that they didn’t fall behind.

The relatively small proportions of students at each phase who felt that homework was usually not important or that it ‘depended’, most often felt that spending all day at school should be enough time to cover everything they needed to accomplish, that when at home they should be free to choose their own activities and spend time with their families rather than do homework, that most homework didn’t help their learning but was in their experience boring and ‘pointless’, or they just didn’t believe in it.

- *“You do so much at school. You need to spend time with your family. If you have homework, there should be a longer weekend.”*
- *“It’s not very important ’cause we do it in class and we, like, do it again at home, it’s real boring.”*
- *“Schoolwork should be done at school, after school is for relaxation/sports. I don’t bother doing it because I know I won’t get it finished.”*
- *“[Homework is not important] ’cause heaps of people say [Year 9] is a ‘muck around year’, that next year is when things kick in.”*
- *“School is for learning, not home.”*
- *“Spend six hours in school and that’s enough, we should be able to muck around for awhile after school and not have to worry about doing homework.”*

The Importance of Homework

According to Emily, homework helps show that a student can work independently.

Given the previous discussion, not surprisingly, Emily considered homework to be a ‘very important’⁴⁷ aspect of her learning and schooling at each phase of the study.

As is often evident in Emily’s answers, her reasons for saying homework was important show her to be a reflective student.

In Phase 1, she explained that homework was important:

“Because if you do homework it helps parents know what you are learning. Helps them see that you can work individually [on your own].”

And in Phase 2 her view was:

“Because it’s revision of what you have learned. Helps you get to know it [the subject] better.”

In Phase 3 Emily again mentioned that homework was helpful for extending her learning, but

added two further ingredients: that of ‘negative consequences’ for not completing homework (often mentioned by our students once they had reached Year 9), and the value of homework for refining organisational skills (eg, juggling deadlines).

“Because if we don’t, we get punished. [Also so we] learn independently of the teacher — so it is what we know, not the teacher. And it helps us organise ourselves, and things like that.”

And in Phase 4 Emily’s reason for considering homework to be very important was:

“Because of NCEA — preparing for it. And so parents can see you are learning something.”

Problems Completing Homework

Emily reported at each phase of the study that she did not have any problems getting her homework done.

A more pragmatic view was that by doing homework, you can avoid punishment!

⁴⁷ Students were asked to say how important they thought homework was by choosing one of the following options: ‘Very important’; ‘It matters’; ‘Not important’; ‘Don’t know/haven’t thought about it’; ‘Depends’.

Parent Feedback about Homework

Parents too were asked a number of questions about homework, some focusing on their own 'homework behaviours'. When we asked in Phase 1 whether they helped Emily with her homework, Emily's parents answered 'no, never or hardly ever', explaining that this was *"because she understands what needs to be done."* But they did add that they regularly checked how Emily was progressing with her homework and that, on occasion, when Emily required it, one of them would *"give explanations on certain subjects so she understands facts"*.

A further question in Phase 1 — and repeated in each subsequent phase — asked for opinions about the amount of homework students were receiving. Emily's parents shared Emily's own estimation, that is, that she was getting 'about the right amount' in Year 8, adding that they felt that Emily's homework during the year ...

"...has helped prepare her for Year 9, especially completing tasks by certain days."

Their view in Phase 3 of the amount of homework Emily had been receiving in Year 9 was that it 'seems about the right amount'.

Emily's Overview of Homework

Finally, on the topic of homework, students were asked to rate a number of statements — shown in Exhibit C — to say how often each one 'happened with their homework'. This was partly to cross-check their previous responses about homework and partly to obtain some additional information about homework in a concise way. The results show that while Emily continued to be assiduous throughout the study about doing her homework — at each phase she indicated 'always or almost always' completing it, by Phase 3, and to a lesser extent on into Phase 4, she was feeling considerably less positive about doing it⁴⁸. Her references to the difficulties involved in successfully managing assignments from different teachers in order to meet deadlines probably largely explains this less positive attitude in Year 9, whereas in her first term in Year 10, as signalled earlier in this report, it was more likely due to her heavy involvement in extra-curricular activity at school.

They felt that homework in Year 8 helped prepare Emily for secondary school.

Emily once more emphasised the difficulties managing multiple homework deadlines.

Exhibit C: Overview questions regarding students' views and experiences of homework

Aspect of homework
a) I do my homework
b) I use a computer at home to do my homework
c) My parents/caregivers check that I have done my homework
d) I need help with my homework
e) My parents/caregivers help me with my homework if I need it
f) Someone else (other than my parents/caregivers) helps me with my homework if I need it
g) I find my homework more challenging or difficult than homework last year
h) My homework this year helps me learn or understand better
i) I like doing my homework
Students indicated the extent to which each statement applied to them by selecting from the following scale:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 = Always or almost always • 2 = Usually • 3 = Sometimes • 4 = Not very often • 5 = Never or hardly ever

⁴⁸ Compared to Phase 1 when she 'always or almost always' enjoyed doing her homework, in Phase 4 Emily was now stating that she only 'sometimes' enjoyed it.

All Students

Difficulties experienced in completing homework

The table shows students' responses to the question 'Do you find it hard to get your homework done?'

	Phase 1 %	Phase 2 %	Phase 3 %	Phase 4 %
No	68	36	37	30
Yes, sometimes	29	60	54	65
Yes, usually	2	5	7	3
Missing data	1	–	2	1

It is of note that once at secondary school, considerably more students indicated that they found it hard to get their homework done, at least some of the time.

Students who 'sometimes' or 'usually' experienced difficulties in completing their homework in Phase 1 explained that, *most often*, this was for one or more of the following reasons: having after-school sports commitments (N=9), finding the homework boring (8) and/or not wanting to do it (5), forgetting to take their homework assignments home (7), feeling too tired (7), finding it too noisy at home to be able to work at it (6), finding the homework too hard (5), being lazy and/or easily distracted from the task (5), and preferring to play on the computer/Playstation (5).

In Phase 2, students gave the same sorts of explanations for any difficulties in completing homework; however, they were now more likely to give tiredness as a reason (12), to say they preferred to watch TV (11), (perhaps, again, because they were more often tired after school than they had been at primary school), to say they found homework boring (10) or difficult (9), and to say they just didn't want to do it, because there were better things to do (9). However, students were less likely to say they forgot to take their homework assignments home (3).

In Phase 3, while the above reasons were mentioned once more — especially finding some homework too hard (N=11), the most frequently mentioned difficulty was now that of coping with deadline clashes. Some of the students who gave this reason also expressed the realisation that it was often their 'own fault', and that they needed to plan and organise themselves more efficiently.

- *"Bit too hard or too much, especially when it's all due at once. Sometimes I don't get down to it and have to rush at the end, and sometimes get four projects at once."*
- *"It's a planning issue — when assignments come all at once. And there's more homework than last year, so it's busier."*
- *"I leave it to the last minute so then it's a rush and I have mum and dad yelling at me."*
- *"When I have a lot to do: sometimes we get lots of assignments at once and it's hard to fit them all in."*
- *"Lots of 'stuff' on, not enough time. Need to think ahead and plan what I need to do."*

By Phase 4, the proportion of students who indicated that they at least 'sometimes' had difficulties completing their homework was slightly higher than it was in Phases 2 or 3.

Once more the reasons given were generally the same as those raised previously, with tiredness, difficulty of the homework, and trouble managing competing deadlines featuring most often in students' responses. And, in the case of seven students, having to do household tasks made it harder for them to complete homework. A more general response was the desire to do other things rather than homework, such as watch TV and spend time with friends.

continued...

All Students

Difficulties experienced in completing homework – continued

- “Other things to do, like rugby training. It’s hard to fit it in. Get tired with school and rugby training. (I play rugby on Saturday and Sunday for a club as well as playing for school.) I’d like to be in the All Blacks one day and I don’t see the point in doing it [homework].”
- “Sometimes happy to do it and sometimes not, especially when I’ve got other things to do, like going to ATC [Air Training Corps], and when I’m really tired. I’m tired when I get home from school.”
- “Heaps of distractions, headaches, brother is noisy, Mum wants me to do little jobs for her.”
- “I’m not good at time management.”
- “Sometimes I don’t see the point in doing it, so I just don’t do it.”
- “We’ve got both Playstation and X-box in the living room and usually I’m playing one of them.”
- “Mum asks me to do jobs around the house.”

Overview of students’ views and experiences of homework

The data in the tables (below and overleaf) show that, over the course of the study, although students did not generally indicate needing less assistance, parents became less likely to help their children (in the study) with homework or check that they had completed it. Students also seemed less likely to receive help with their homework from other people as time went on.

There could be a number of reasons for this, including it becoming more difficult to assist increasingly independent teenagers, but also perhaps because of an assumption that the older the child becomes, the less likely they are to need help. And, as well, there is the possibility that some parents at least become less confident about their ability to assist with homework once their child reaches secondary school, perhaps perceiving the tasks involved to be much more difficult or as beyond their experience.

	Proportion of students who answered ‘Always or almost always’ or ‘Usually’ ^a to each of the listed statements			
	Phase 1 %	Phase 2 %	Phase 3 %	Phase 4 %
I do my homework	91	90	84	84
I use a computer at home to do my homework	47	42	43	37
My parents/caregivers check that I have done my homework	70	73	55	61
I need help with my homework	18	21	19	14
My parents/caregivers help me with my homework if I need it	83	89	77	73
Someone else (other than my parents/caregivers) helps me with my homework if I need it	56	46	39	32
I find my homework more challenging or difficult than homework last year	Not asked	58	48	36
My homework this year helps me learn or understand better	Not asked	78	67	65
I like doing my homework	62	49	38	40

^a To simplify presentation of the data, these two response categories have been combined.

continued...

All Students

Overview of students' views and experiences of homework – continued

Data relating to the statement 'I find my homework more challenging... than last year' suggest that once they reached Year 10, students were now more 'comfortable' about the homework they were receiving, having gained a greater understanding of the expectations placed on them in terms of study and homework at secondary school than they'd had in Year 9, and also because of accumulated experience in juggling homework assignments from different teachers.

	Proportion of students who answered 'Not very often' or 'Never or hardly ever' ^a to each of the listed statements			
	Phase 1 %	Phase 2 %	Phase 3 %	Phase 4 %
I do my homework	1	5	8	1
I use a computer at home to do my homework	30	20	23	31
My parents/caregivers check that I have done my homework	8	13	19	20
I need help with my homework	46	44	34	46
My parents/caregivers help me with my homework if I need it	3	5	7	10
Someone else (other than my parents/caregivers) helps me with my homework if I need it	26	22	33	35
I find my homework more challenging or difficult than homework last year	Not asked	18	17	30
My homework this year helps me learn or understand better	Not asked	6	6	3
I like doing my homework	14	26	34	29

^a In the interest of simplicity, these two response categories have been combined.

Although the proportion of students who indicated seldom doing their homework was low overall, it is of note that relatively more students in Year 9 answered this way — five percent in Phase 2 and eight percent in Phase 3, compared to only one percent in each of Phases 1 and 4. In light of other data relating to lower levels of engagement in their learning over time, it is also of interest that students were considerably less likely to say they enjoyed doing their homework once they were at secondary school.

Summary Statements Regarding Emily's Overall Orientation to School

The information presented in this chapter shows that Emily had very good school attendance, a strong work ethic, and, on the basis of her positive attitudes and behaviour in relation to homework,

a realisation that learning did not begin and end at the school gates. And it is very evident that for such a highly people-orientated person as Emily, the social opportunities afforded by school, including those opened up by participation in extra-curricular activities, held very strong appeal.