

Student Views and Experiences of School

Reference to the ‘differences’ between primary and secondary schools and speculation about how these differences may impact on students are prevalent. As well, the research literature pays considerable attention to this topic. We therefore wanted to investigate, as an integral part of this study, how Emily and other students regarded their schooling experiences at various intervals, as they progressed from Year 8 through to Year 10. And, again, consideration of the extent to which a student enjoys school continues the theme in the previous two chapters of important ingredients for student learning.

Feelings about School at each Phase of the Study

Students were asked the same broad question about the extent to which they liked school at each phase of the study. The question was: ‘Thinking about school this year [or this term], most of the time, do you enjoy or like going to school?’⁴⁹ Emily’s particular responses are now discussed.

She was keen to expand her horizons beyond primary school.

Overall Enjoyment of School

Emily was ‘definite’ about enjoying or liking school as a Year 8 student. However, she added that what ‘would have helped [her] enjoy school more’ that year was...

“...if school had a larger population to meet more people [and if there had been] more school sports”,

Friends were fundamental to Emily’s liking for school.

suggesting she was ready to move out into a ‘bigger world’, an encouraging indicator for a positive transition to secondary school.

Early in Year 9, Emily was again definite about enjoying school, but, in the context of this specific question⁵⁰, was more conservatively positive towards the end of Year 9. She explained:

“Because I don’t look forward to coming for some of the classes sometimes. Don’t like the work. [But] I like coming to see my friends and hear all the interesting things going on.”

Emily identified many ‘best things’ about Year 8.

In Year 10, Emily once more ‘definitely’ enjoyed school, due in large part to her friends:

“Not being around my friends I would die! I have to text people even when I’m on holiday. [I’m] just really nosy and want to know what’s happening.”

Best Liked Aspects of School — Emily’s Perspective

As well as obtaining the overall rating of their enjoyment of school, we asked students what they most — or least — liked about school at each phase of the study.

This is what Emily had to say about what she was enjoying most about her final year at primary school:

“Meeting new people. Learning particular subjects. Writing stories. Learning new sports this year. [Having senior student] privileges to look forward to and getting certain privileges — eg, sit on benches instead of on the floor in assembly. Going to camp, senior formals, prize giving. My teacher and the other [Years 7 and 8] teachers — they’re cool. Practically anything that is fun.”

After a term at secondary school, Emily was even more enthusiastic about school, but this time she particularly emphasised her pleasure at being able to see her (new) friends at school:

“Everything! Especially getting to see your friends — ‘cause the only time I get to see them is at school. They don’t live in my area. (And I like all my teachers — just some expect a lot more [than others].)”

⁴⁹ Students’ responses were categorised as ‘Yes, definitely’, ‘Qualified yes’, ‘Qualified no’ and ‘No, not at all’.

⁵⁰ As discussed later in this chapter (in particular, refer footnote 51), Emily also had many positive things to say about school in Phase 3 when asked what she ‘liked most’ about it. But in terms of what she least liked about school at that stage, Emily identified some ‘relationship issues’ as a difficult aspect for her of being in Year 9.

All Students

Overall enjoyment of school at each phase of the study

The table below shows that more than half of students (58%) were very positive about school in Year 8 (Phase 1), saying they ‘definitely’ enjoyed it when asked whether, in general, they liked or enjoyed going to school.

Like or enjoy school this year/ term?	Phase 1 %	Phase 2 %	Phase 3 %	Phase 4 %
Yes, definitely	58	60	43	55
Qualified yes	33	35	48	38
Qualified no	4	4	3	4
No, not at all	5	1	3	2
Missing data	–	1	3	–

The things they enjoyed most about school were spending time with friends, playing sports, their particular teacher(s), and learning about specific subjects or topics.

After a term at secondary school a very similar proportion (60%) of students again said they were ‘definitely’ enjoying school.

However, by the end of Year 9 students were less likely to indicate ‘definitely’ liking school, with only 43 percent now giving this rating.

The proportion of students expressing very positive attitudes towards school had risen again by Phase 4, with 55 percent of students indicating they ‘definitely’ liked going to school.

And, as was the case at all other phases of the study, students most often said that, first and foremost, what they most liked about school was seeing their friends there.

As well, they enjoyed learning new and challenging things, enjoyed particular subjects, and appreciated the opportunity to play different, or several, sports, and take part in a range of performing arts and other extra-curricular activities.

They also said it was good to be at school because they would get bored if they stayed at home all the time:

- *“I get bored at home. Never want to say home even if I’m sick. It’s good meeting with friends and I enjoy some of my subjects.”*
- *“Because it’s something to do outside home, and you get bored if you stay home. I get most of my friends from school. I learn a lot at school, though sometimes I get bored.”*
- *“Like coming to see my friends. Nothing to do at home, just watch TV and play games.”*

The data in the table further show that most remaining students at each phase gave a ‘qualified yes’ response, saying that while they mainly liked going to school, there were some things they particularly didn’t enjoy. These included: not liking to go to school on days when there were tests (especially when they hadn’t prepared for them); when they hadn’t done their homework or completed an assignment and knew they faced punishment; when they had had a falling out with their friends or a teacher; when what they were studying in class was too difficult, or too boring; and when they didn’t feel well or were too tired.

continued...

All Students

Overall enjoyment of school at each phase of the study – continued

The small number of students at each phase who either gave a ‘qualified no’ response or said that they did not like school at all at one or more phases of the study (none were consistently ‘negative’ overall at all four phases) mostly said that this was because of:

- relationship difficulties, the behaviour of others;
 - *“I wish I had more friends.”*
 - *“Teachers blame me for things I don’t do.”*
 - *“Because I just don’t enjoy it, I don’t know — I reckon other schools can be cool, but this school... all right, I just don’t like the kids.”*
 - *“I don’t like most of the teachers because they pick on me because I’m not that good, I’m not perfect at everything. They say you should be more like the brainy people but I don’t want to do that.”*
 - *“When people insult me about my health problem.”*
- finding the work difficult, or in one case, not challenging enough;
- finding school in general to be ‘boring’, irrelevant, and hard to cope with.
 - *“Rather be doing other things, like riding my motor bike.”*
 - *“School is boring. Teachers are boring.”*

And in Phase 2 in particular, but also in Phase 3, negative feelings about school were sometimes related to the transition:

- *“Didn’t want to come to this school ’cause it had a bad reputation. Would like to be at another secondary school where my best friend is.”*
- *“I don’t like this school, too much fighting.”*
- *“I much prefer primary [school], primary was more fun. It gets boring here, nothing to do at lunchtimes, no lunchtime sports. There’s no equipment to use and it’s too much to bring your own ball (from home) and carry it around all day.”*

‘All Students’ sections later in this chapter contain further comments from students about what they most/least liked about school.

Late in Year 9, Emily expressed well-balanced views about school: she was enjoying learning as well as friendships.

When, in Phase 3, she was asked to think back over her first year at secondary school and say what the best things about it had been, Emily was again very positive. The excitement about social opportunities expressed earlier in the year was still evident, but now that she had had longer to settle in, Emily seemed to have re-established the more balanced view about school suggested by her Phase 1 response, where she mentioned enjoying both social and ‘academic’ aspects of school:

“Meeting new people. Learning new things. I just like everything — it’s just like a challenge every day.”⁵¹

At various times throughout her Phase 4 interview Emily mentioned a range of interesting things she was doing and learning at school as a Year 10 student. However, when asked specifically what she felt were the best things about school so far that year, not surprisingly, given so many of her previous responses, Emily focused on social interactions:

“My friends and the people I meet — all the people I come in contact with.”

⁵¹ Emily’s answer here seems to contradict her ‘qualified yes’ response in Phase 3 to the question ‘...most of the time do you enjoy or like school this year’, discussed earlier in this chapter. But, on reflection, it seems entirely plausible to express both of these views simultaneously. The different nuances expressed may also be a function of the way the questions were worded. In addition, Emily’s responses on what she least liked about school show that while she was generally very positive about school, she did experience some difficulties.

Parent Perspectives on what Emily Most Enjoyed about School

To the question ‘What are the main things that your Year 8 child enjoys about school this year?’, Emily’s parents advised that Emily especially enjoyed extra-curricular activities and special projects:

“[The school musical], camp, disco, and being elected to the committee for putting together the Year 8 [students] yearbook.”

One year on, Emily’s parents stated that *“having lots of friends”* was a particular source of enjoyment for their daughter in her first year at secondary school, further reinforcing a consistent theme that friends and social networks were very important to Emily. Also, the similarity in responses from Emily and her parents once more highlight effective levels of communication between them.

Her parents also identified friends as a major factor in Emily’s enjoyment of school.

Luke on Enjoyment of School

While Luke liked school *“most of the time”* in Year 8, from time to time he was less enthusiastic: *“sometimes the work is too hard”* or *“when I am too tired [eg], we went to the circus last night and didn’t get home until midnight.”*

Once at secondary school, Luke stated early on that he *“definitely”* liked going to school and considered that there was really *“nothing”* that he did not like.

But towards the end of Year 9, Luke expressed less positive feelings about school than he had previously, now saying he only *“sometimes”* enjoyed school. He explained:

“Because I’m tired — it’s hard to get up in the morning.” (But this was perhaps more an indication of the effect of his personal worries at the time than a measure of his feelings about school per se.)

And, unlike at the other three phases of the study when he said there was not really anything that was ‘not so good’ about school, at this stage Luke commented:

“The rubbish, the litter around the school. It looks awful.”

At the end of his first term as a Year 10 student, Luke explained that the reason he ‘definitely’ enjoyed school some of the time and at other times felt less keen was:

“When I’m tired or when I haven’t done my homework I don’t like it so much, but the rest of the time it’s good.”

It is probably not a coincidence that once his personal worries had passed, Luke reverted to more positive expressions about school (ie, in Phase 4).

The things Luke had enjoyed or liked most about Year 8 were:

“Seeing friends; going on school trips — I enjoy them, we’ve been on heaps of them; dance class at school — we’re going to perform at camp; sports, and [I] mostly like the teachers.”

In his first term in Year 9, the ‘best things about school so far that year’ were:

“Just meeting new friends — a bigger range of people; learning new stuff — [especially in] social studies and maths, and hanging out with my friends.”

Despite being not quite as positive about school as he had been earlier in Year 9, Luke nevertheless still mentioned enjoying both social and ‘academic’ aspects of school near the end of his first year at secondary school:

“Having different options. Hanging out with friends. The teachers are cool, some of them.”

Once in Year 10, Luke was obviously enjoying the increased status of no longer being a first-year student at secondary school:

“Not being a third former [any more]. Having different teachers — good to have a change.”

All Students

What they liked best about school

Phase 1: Year 8

All students at this stage identified one or more things that they enjoyed or liked most about school that year. The aspects most often mentioned as particularly positive for them were:

- interacting with their friends;
- participating in sports;
- their particular teachers and often other teachers in the school as well;
- learning particular subjects, new things, or learning and schoolwork in general, especially when they could see they were making good progress — *“Understand work better than last year”*; *“Seeing how much I have learned”*;
- going on school trips, including school camp which was a particular favourite with quite a number of students;
- taking part in performing arts activities;
- the special duties or responsibilities they had taken on: *“The jobs I do for the school to help them out”*; *“Enjoy organising the Talent Quest we have on at the moment”*; *“Being road patrol rep”*; *“Was chosen to be house leader”*; *“I like organising things in the school”*; and
- that they found school as a whole an inviting, friendly, comfortable place to be.

Phases 2 and 3: Year 9

The majority of our students also found a range of things to enjoy in their first year at secondary school.

In each of Phases 2 and 3, but especially in Phase 2, as overall enthusiasm for school had declined somewhat towards the end of Year 9, they mentioned enjoying:

- increased social opportunities (eg, the bigger, more diverse student population), and making new friends;
- hanging out with friends;
- the positive interactions they had with teachers;
- new challenges;
- learning new things, learning particular subjects, and learning and schoolwork in general;
- having option subjects;
- greater opportunities for extra-curricular involvement, particularly sports and the performing arts, and also cultural activities, such as kapa haka;
- having a range of teachers and defined subject areas;
- feeling more grown up (this was more often said in Phase 2 than in Phase 3);
- considering, at times, that there were less restrictions on them than at primary school (‘getting away with a bit more’ because teachers were less likely to see everything they did over the course of a day);
- school trips;
- simply being at school rather than at home;
- there being established rules to help everyone;
- having a school canteen.

The following quotes from students in Year 9 sum up well the sorts of positive comments that students made overall:

- *“Meeting new people, making new friends. Having different options, hanging out with friends. The teachers are cool, some of them.”*

continued...

All Students

What they liked best about school – continued

- *“The teachers are very easy to talk to. It’s cool to have options, different activities — we didn’t have that last year. More chance [this year] to do sport, singing out of school. Good to have canteen, ’cause last year we didn’t have it. Schoolwork is cool — not too hard and not too easy, it’s at your level, and you can always ask for more if it’s too easy.”*
- *“Meeting new people, like friends and stuff. Lots more things to do, more things offered to you than at primary. More sports, more opportunities. Get offered things like Outward Bound, going out of school and doing stuff. Singing groups, Barbershop competition. School trips — get to go to fun places (performing arts show, Pacific dances).”*
- *“Don’t see the same teachers all the time, see different teachers for different subjects.”*
- *“The variety of sports that we have. Much bigger library than last year, more reference subjects. Lots more subjects than last year. Like it way better than school last year: way more stuff to do (we did the same thing all the time there).”*
- *“Getting more confidence through dance and drama because it takes most of the shyness away — we get to perform in front of our peers. Maths I’m getting really good at because I’m being taught new things.”*
- *“The peer supporters: it’s like having a lot of leaders. They’re seventh formers, they’ve been through what we’re going through now and they can tell us [about their experiences and what to do]. They come to our class every form time. There’s five of them in my class. Some of the teachers are really nice and they teach us new things, so we’re learning new stuff. They’re the main things I like about school.”*

Phase 4: Year 10

Once in Year 10, the students again emphasised that ‘hanging out with friends’, including making new friends, was the aspect of school they most enjoyed. This was followed by enjoying learning particular subjects or topics, especially when learning new or different things; playing sports and participating in other extra-curricular activities; and liking or appreciating particular teachers.

Students at this stage were less likely to spontaneously mention ‘new challenges’ as an aspect of school they particularly liked so far that year but, in contrast, quite often referred to enjoying feeling more relaxed about school because they now knew how things operated, and were no longer the youngest in the school.

A small sample to reflect the flavour of students’ comments in Year 10 follows.

- *“Just the new people coming in, the third formers [Year 9s]. It’s good to see new faces and it makes me feel a lot older. It’s much easier at school this year because of being used to it now. Know what to watch out for and stuff — for example, if you’ve done a test before and know what you’re being judged on. And you know what teachers to look out for: the strict ones and the nice ones. And I just like how the school is improving every year, it makes it better coming here. They [the Student Council] are coming up with new ideas every year, like having picnic tables. They [the school/teachers] listen to what the students have to say.”*
- *“Probably because I’m not a third former this year and I’m more confident to do things now that I know the school. I’m more involved with the school, do more, get to know more people. I didn’t know what to expect last year.”*

continued...

All Students

What they liked best about school – continued

- “Being Year 10, [younger] kids look up to you.”
- “Doing new things — learning stuff we don’t already know. Hanging out with my mates.”
- “My friends. All the sports activities. Get more options this year. I like performing arts.”
- “Teachers are nice to me, respect me. They give me challenging work and homework if I ask for it.”
- “[School this year] taking us one step closer to something big — probably a better future. It depends on what options you take.”
- “Teachers are pretty cool — awesome. Sometimes I enjoy work: boring to begin with, but if I get a good mark I’m pretty proud.”

Least Liked Aspects of School — Emily’s Perspective

Emily was more critical when work was boring and she did not have rapport with a teacher.

For Phase 1, we asked the students what they did not like about school *only* if they had already indicated that they did not generally enjoy going to school. As Emily had answered that she “*definitely!*” enjoyed school, this topic was not pursued with her.

However, in Phase 2, all students were asked ‘What do you think are the **not so good** things about school so far this year?’ Even though Emily basically liked “*Everything!*” about her new school, she added:

“Some of the boring topics — some of them aren’t fun. But you do get to learn new things.”

Her parents advised that Emily was experiencing some ups and downs at school.

Similarly, in Phase 3, while continuing to say that, overall, she still liked pretty much “*everything*” about school, she referred to some ‘relationship’ issues:

“[In one of my classes], I don’t really get along with the teacher that well. Treats us too much like little kids. But she is getting better — sort of better anyway after she did a survey of students about what they liked and didn’t like. [The other not so good thing is] fear about [getting] a hiding [from another student] — for something that once happened.”

The only ‘not so good’⁵² thing about school for Emily in her first term in Year 10 was:

“Getting involved in all the extra-curricular activities and not being able to finish all my schoolwork. Getting behind in two subjects.”

But Emily did add that since her involvement in one particular extra-curricular activity had ended, she was

getting back on track with her work, and her worries about falling behind had reduced considerably.

Parent Perspectives on what Emily Did Not Enjoy about School

Outlining the main things their daughter ‘did not enjoy about school that year’, Emily’s parents stated in Phase 1 that “*Overall, she has enjoyed everything*”, reinforcing Emily’s own viewpoint.

But in Phase 3, again reflecting Emily’s responses, parental feedback was that life at school was not as plain sailing for Emily as it had been:

“Emily has not enjoyed being pulled up by one of her teachers for behaviour that is not acceptable and not being given a chance to explain the situation.”

Overview of Emily’s Attitude to School from the Perspectives of Parents and Teachers

Parent perspective

Parental responses to the list of statements shown in Exhibit D support Emily’s statements that, for the majority of the time, she enjoyed going to school, found much of what she was learning at school to be interesting, generally tried to do her best (despite indications of a small decline in effort by Phase 3⁵³), and was proud of her achievements at school. These data also reinforce other parental feedback, and information collected from teachers and from Emily herself, that Emily had good relations with most other students.

⁵² To other questions in Phase 4, however, relating to her subjects, teachers, teaching, and so on, Emily provided insightful comments about how she thought things could be even better at school: that is, she had no major complaints, but was at the same time aware that ‘things are never perfect’.

⁵³ To the statement ‘My child tries her best at school’, Emily’s parents answered ‘yes, all or nearly all of the time’ in Phase 1 but chose the rating ‘yes, most of the time’ in Phase 3.

However it was also evident that Emily felt less 'safe at school' at the end of Year 9 than she had a year earlier: compared to their view in Phase 1 that Emily felt safe at school 'all or nearly all of the time', in Phase 3 her parents now answered 'sometimes yes, sometimes no'. As previously discussed, this appeared to be a result of one student who had threatened to give Emily 'a hiding', and not due to more widespread concerns about the behaviour of the student population as a whole.

Teacher perspectives

Teachers in each of Phases 1, 3 and 4 rated students on the extent to which they were enjoying school, trying hard at school, and engaging well in extra-curricular activities beyond the classroom.

The data showed that Emily's Year 9 English/form teacher was a little less positive in Phase 3 regarding the amount of effort Emily was putting into her schoolwork than her Year 8 teacher had been the previous year. Their respective ratings on a five-point scale from '1=Very much' to '5=Not at all' were '2' and '1'.

This result is similar to the feedback provided by Emily's parents when they noted in Phase 3 that Emily was not currently trying quite as hard at her schoolwork as she had in Phase 1. And while teachers before and in the first year following the transition to secondary school were in agreement about the level of Emily's engagement in extra-curricular activities (each giving her a rating of '2'), the teacher answering in Phase 3 was a little less likely than the Year 8 teacher — and Emily and her parents — to say that she enjoyed school (a rating of '2', rather than '1').

In Phase 4, however, Emily's Year 10 teacher rated Emily as enjoying school 'very much'. She also indicated that it was 'very much' the case that Emily tried hard at her schoolwork and engaged well in activities beyond the classroom. This teacher's responses coincide with what Emily herself frequently suggested in various ways: that she was feeling much more established and settled at school in Year 10, and was intending to do her best.

Teachers reported Emily as much more settled in Year 10.

Exhibit D: Dimensions on which parents rated their child's attitudes to school and other matters

Parental perceptions of child's views	
My child enjoys going to school	<p><i>Parents rated their child on each of these statements according to the scale that follows:</i></p> <p>1 = Yes, all or nearly all of the time</p> <p>2 = Yes, most of the time</p> <p>3 = Sometimes yes, sometimes no</p> <p>4 = No, not very often</p> <p>5 = No, never or hardly ever</p> <p>8 = Not sure, don't really know</p>
My child wants to do well at school	
My child tries her best at school	
My child is proud of her schoolwork	
My child thinks they do interesting things at school	
My child feels safe at school	
My child finds some subjects difficult	
My child finishes all homework	
My child enjoys new experiences or challenges	
My child asks me for advice or help	
My child gets on well with other students	
My child shows me respect	

All Students

Least liked aspects of school

Phase 1: Year 8

Students were less likely in Year 8 than they were in either Year 9 or Year 10 to nominate what for them were ‘not so good things’ about school. One student, for example, commented: *“Nothing too much [that I don’t like] actually — I enjoy most things.”*

But of those who did, they most often mentioned issues to do with their schoolwork — when it was too hard, when it was boring, not interesting, or they considered it irrelevant, or when they went over the same things, instead of moving on to new work; and relationship problems, with other students and/or teachers.

Examples of responses follow:

- *“Feel awkward if I’m left behind in work.”*
- *“If I’m having difficulty with something in work, that’s when school is not so good.”*
- *“I don’t like maths, it’s too hard.”*
- *“Silent reading is boring and we have to do it for ages.”*
- *“I don’t like learning about religions, it’s kind of boring, not useful. That’s the only thing I don’t like [about school].”*
- *“Sometimes boring and they teach us the same things.”*
- *“Being tired makes work too hard sometimes.”*
- *“Don’t like my teacher — grumpy with the boys, favours girls.”*
- *“My other friends drag me down.”*
- *“Some students are annoying.”*
- *“When I get in trouble.”*

Phases 2 and 3: Year 9

Seventeen percent of students in Phase 2 and 11 percent in Phase 3 stated that there was nothing they currently disliked about school: *“Can’t really think of anything I don’t like”*; *“Even when I don’t like some things (eg, some teachers) I still have fun”*; *“Nothing bothers me”*.

But the remaining students, as well as specifying a range of things they had particularly liked about their first year at secondary school, also talked about ‘not so good aspects of school’ from their perspective.

The difficulties they mentioned fell into one or more of the following categories.

- Difficult relationships with teachers and/or having to adjust to a range of teacher personalities and styles.
 - *“Some of the teachers are not the best, they’re OK. But sometimes we get told off for little things that don’t matter. We get told off for talking, but it might just be a problem with how they teach. I loved all my teachers last year, so I miss them. It was weird at the beginning of the year to have all different teachers.”*
 - *“When I ask a question in social studies the teacher says ‘Don’t start an argument’.”*
 - *“My dean thinks I’m a bad boy or something. [Q: Why is that?] “Cause I hang around with the wrong friends.”*
 - *“Don’t like teachers telling us off.”*
 - *“Some of the teachers are mean, strict and don’t understand us.”*

continued...

All Students

Least liked aspects of school – continued

- Issues with their schoolwork: when it was too difficult; too easy/not challenging enough; when they did not enjoy particular subjects, topics, or activities; when the way they were learning was boring or de-motivating and/or the learning environment did not facilitate learning (eg, was disruptive); when it was hard to juggle class work with other commitments.
 - *“The work is too hard most of the time, and homework, it’s too much and mostly too hard.”*
 - *“Science: I pay attention but sometimes I just don’t get it, and there are lots of big words to learn like ‘photosynthesis’ and you forget what these words mean if you learned them at the beginning of the year.”*
 - *“Boring subjects, the writing, the theory stuff, copying stuff down.”*
 - *“Options are not so good as I thought they’d be.”*
 - *“Behaviour management problems: would rather be in a different class. Some teachers don’t explain things properly.”*
 - *“Having to learn so much.”*
 - *“What they teach isn’t interesting to me.”*
 - *“Workload is greater than intermediate.”*
 - *“Trying to juggle school stuff and extra-curricular activities such as cricket, scouts and debating.”*
 - *“Students are a lot noisier in class. They call out, get away with a lot more. Some teachers deal with it well, some can’t make them [students] settle down. Makes it hard for others to learn.”*
- Worries about or dislike of homework, in particular, balancing timelines/assignments from different teachers.
 - *“Get quite a bit of homework, all at the same time, so it’s hard to get it all done. It’s a big change from last year.”*
 - *“Sometimes get heaps of homework — lots due at the same time. I try to work on them all at once but it’s hard to balance this. Sometimes just finish one assignment and we get another one. The work is easier than last year but it’s harder to plan the time or get the time for it.”*
- The longer days, different interval and lunch times, having set timetables/timelines, carrying bags around, moving classes, increased travel to and from school: all contributing to greater fatigue.
 - *“The school day is too long, longer than before. Get tired. The late lunch, get hungry”.*
 - *“Having to carry books around all day — heavy bag — can be tiring (‘cause I’m only small).”*
 - *“Going to different teachers, having to move around, so many people, it gets tiring. Having to get up earlier (it’s good getting to sleep in in the weekends).”*
- Not having their friends in their classes or even in the school.
 - *“Don’t have all my old friends here. And don’t like some of the students here.”*
 - *“Miss some of my old friends, they went to other schools.”*
 - *“The bullies! And not many of my friends are in my classes.”*
- Moving on from their previous school and teachers (ie, finding it hard to let go).
 - *“Miss being in just one class.”*
 - *“I miss my old teacher. (The teachers here are OK.)”*

continued...

All Students

Least liked aspects of school – continued

- The behaviour of some other students (eg, wagging school, bullying behaviours, smoking).
 - *“Students who act tough, older students. They say, ‘get out of the way.’”*
 - *“Some of the Year 10s are bullies and boss us around.”*
 - *“The people, some of them, do stupid things, like wag and stuff. I’m not into it.”*
 - *“Bullying by Year 10 to Year 9 students.”*
 - *“The fights (physical) at school — teachers get involved.”*
 - *“Some of the students are just so naughty they get on your nerves.”*
 - *“Too many people in lines for the canteen: they push you and take your place. Don’t like going there because it’s like that.”*
 - *“When there is fighting.”*
 - *“Annoying students that think they are the boss, sometimes there’s a bit of racism.”*
 - *“There is some racism. I’m becoming more aware of it. I can be disturbed by it.”*
 - *“A lot more pushy, bigger, louder, noisier, ‘bullier’ people. A lot of smokers here — heaps: third formers having smokes in the toilets.”*
- Adjusting to the different rules and procedures; and having to wear a uniform.
 - *“I don’t like the uniform, it’s not warm enough and it’s quite expensive. Some students don’t have the warm jacket. I would prefer mufti or a more flexible uniform where you could wear some of your own clothes, like your own jacket.”*
 - *“Getting detentions for coming late to school late with no excuse and wearing non-regulation uniform.”*
 - *“You get in trouble more easy.”*
 - *“No trips outside school, need to be trusted more (so that we can sit under the trees in the shade, go in the corridors without getting kicked out).”*
- Finding lunchtimes were not the relaxing, fun breaks they had been used to in their previous schools (often because they lacked the confidence to go where the ‘bigger students’ were or to find out how to join available activities).
 - *“Nothing interesting to do at lunchtime and interval. We do the same things over and over again. (And on cold, wet days can’t just go in form class.)”*
 - *“Nothing much to do at lunchtime except for walking around: big people take up the courts at lunchtime.”*
 - *“Nothing to do at lunchtimes; lunchtimes are cold and uncomfortable.”*
 - *“Not many things to do at lunchtime — I like playing basketball but there are only three courts at school and they are taken up by the older kids. The line for the canteen at morning tea and lunch is too long.”*
 - *“There’s nothing to do sometimes at lunchtime or interval — for example, if the gym is closed.”*
- Being the ‘babies’ in the school and disliking being called names by the older students and/or sometimes feeling ‘afraid’ of them.
 - *“[Being at the] bottom of the heap.”*
 - *“Some Year 10s yell and call the Year 9s ‘turds’. Happens at morning tea and lunchtime.”*

continued...

All Students

Least liked aspects of school – continued

- Less 'comfort' than they had been used to (mostly relating to the physical environment but also generally).
 - *"The school, it's too big, especially the whole school assemblies."*
 - *"[Don't like] how the school is breaking in pieces because there's not enough money to fix things."*
 - *"The rubbish, there's always rubbish around."*
 - *"Pretty nervous, didn't know many people."*

Phase 4: Year 10

Fifteen percent of the students in Phase 4 stated that there was not really anything that they were disliking about their first term in Year 10: *"Nothing really — everything is going really good."*

Of those who did specify 'not so good aspects of school' at that time, their comments were mainly to do with their relationships with certain teachers, dislike of or problems with homework, issues to do with school rules and discipline, dislike of what and how they were learning, and finding some of their work too difficult (especially compared to the previous year). Representative comments follow.

- *"I don't like all the writing — mainly in science and social studies but pretty much in every subject except for options. Probably that's the only thing I really don't like, all the writing."*
- *"Just some of the work, it's just boring"; and, "Sometimes it gets boring — when we're doing stuff we did last year."*
- *"The level of work: the standard of work we have to work to, it's just hard. In some subjects it's harder than last year (eg, social studies, 'cause we're doing NCEA credits — it was recommended to us to do it). In other subjects it's easy (eg, English, it's my best subject). Maths is hard. Nothing else I don't like, I think that's it."*
- *"More work to do in classes, and exams — we have to study."*
- *"[Don't like it] when what we're learning is not relevant."*
- *"The classes get boring. I'd rather be doing other things (like talking to my mates). I want to stay at school but I'll probably get sick of it before Year 13. Don't think the work is relevant, for example, will never need trigonometry in my life." [Q.: What would you like to be learning?] "Things that you might be interested in."*
- *"The learning system because, you know, the teachers need to control the kids: we don't learn — kids in my class can't learn the task because of the distractions."*
- *"The way things have changed — my Year 9 was easier than Year 10. Some of the work is harder, teachers are more harder (stricter)."*

And as was evident in students' responses in Year 9, some students again found the behaviour of other students disturbing at times, especially when physical fights occurred, there was bullying (of other students, rather than themselves), and when it interrupted their learning in class:

- *"In some classes some students muck around and the whole class misses out."*
- *"I hate my class because of the boys — they are really loud and we always get zeros [for behaviour]."*
- *"Students talk in class and won't be quiet when asked by the teacher — distracts me from learning."*
- *"There's too many fights, there's just fights everywhere. Other people get into trouble for it but I never do [ie, don't fight]. It puts the school down. I wish the kids were better behaved."*

All Students

Parental perceptions of their children's attitudes to school and other matters

Overall, parents were more positive than teachers in how they rated students in terms of their attitudes to school. For example, 88 percent or more of the parents who responded at each phase of the study felt that their child enjoyed going to school nearly all or most of the time, whereas, between 70 and 75 percent of students' teachers considered this to be the case (see 'All Students box' on the next page).

Similarly, considerably more parents than teachers felt that the students generally tried hard at their schoolwork.

On a different track, however, it is interesting to note that, apart from an increase in Phase 2, when students no doubt came home with plenty of news about all the things they were finding different or interesting about secondary school, parents were less likely as time went on to answer that their child thought they did interesting things at school. This finding parallels the downward trend over the course of the study in the proportion of students expressing positive attitudes to their subjects at school.

	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3		Phase 4	
	All, nearly all of the time/ Most of the time ^a %	Not very often/ Never or hardly ever ^a %	All, nearly all of the time/ Most of the time ^a %	Not very often/ Never or hardly ever %	All, nearly all of the time/ Most of the time %	Not very often/ Never or hardly ever %	All, nearly all of the time/ Most of the time %	Not very often/ Never or hardly ever %
My child enjoys going to school	92	3	98	–	97	2	88	3
My child wants to do well at school	89	–	93	–	91	–	90	–
My child is proud of his/her schoolwork	74	2	89	2	78	2	82	–
My child tries his/her best at school	79	2	95	–	78	3	77	–
My child thinks they do interesting things at school	60	3	78	4	53	7	47	3
My child feels safe at school	92	2	89	4	86	3	77	2
My child finds some subjects difficult	18	40	4	44	19	38	15	43
My child finishes all homework	69	6	73	2	64	7	70	5
My child enjoys new experiences or challenges	82	–	84	–	83	–	82	–
My child asks me for advice or help	60	8	55	9	33	14	48	15
My child gets on well with other students	85	–	93	2	95	2	90	–
My child shows me respect	84	–	78	4	88	–	80	3

^a As in previous 'All Students' tables, the response categories 'All or nearly all the time' and 'Most of the time' have been combined to simplify presentation of the data over multiple phases; the response categories 'Not very often' and 'Never or hardly ever' have been similarly combined. When providing their feedback, as part of a six-point scale, parents also had the response categories 'Sometimes yes, and sometimes no' and 'Not sure/don't really know' at their disposal. For participating parents there was minimal missing data for this question: similarly, very few (between 1% and 3% on a small number of the dimensions) chose the 'Not sure/don't really know' option.)

All Students

Teacher perspectives on students' overall attitudes to school

In each of Phases 1, 3, and 4, using the five-point scale ranging from '1 = Very much' to '5 = Not at all', students' teachers considered that between 70 and 75 percent of students generally *enjoyed school* (ie, they rated them as either '1' or '2').

In Phases 1 and 4, teachers also considered that just over two-thirds of students mostly tried hard at their schoolwork/did their best at school, although in Phase 3 (end of Year 9) only around 55 percent of students were given a rating of either '1' or '2' on this dimension.

And when asked to rate students on how well they engaged in school activities beyond the classroom, teachers were considerably more likely to say this was the case in Phase 1 (around two-thirds of students) than they were in either Phases 3 or 4. It was also notable that considerably more teachers post-transition answered that they did not know enough about individual students to be able to rate them on this aspect of their schooling.

Views on Learning in Class at the Different Phases

A popular topic in the education literature⁵⁴ concerns the different learning environments students are likely to encounter in primary and secondary schools, and the effects these may have.

There is the often implicit assumption that secondary school classroom environments are usually more formal and structured and 'less fun' for students than their primary school equivalents.

But, somewhat contrary to the assumed characteristics of secondary school classrooms just referred to, some researchers report that students do not necessarily find schoolwork in their first year at secondary school to be 'harder' than at primary school. In fact some students are reported to find it easier or less challenging. This has sometimes been suggested as an explanation of why some students appear to be less motivated learners once they reach secondary school.

To learn more about how participating students viewed their school learning environments before and after transition, and how they felt about the difficulty of the work they were undertaking, we asked them to describe, at each phase of the study, what learning was like for them in their class/es by rating the factors listed in Exhibit E.⁵⁵

Note that whereas Emily and most other students in the study were rating a *single* classroom environment in Year 8, once at secondary school all students were required to make an *overall* judgement — that is, they were asked to think in terms of what learning was *mostly* like across all their subject classes.⁵⁶

Emily's feedback on the dimensions shown in Exhibit E is now discussed under the broad groupings of: 'Difficulty and interest levels of work'; 'Views about classroom environment'; 'Views about teaching strategies or approach'; and 'Views about classroom management'. It is of course appreciated that the complexity of any given classroom cannot be adequately captured by means of the data presented here, but it is hoped that the information discussed will give helpful insights about how a student may experience some aspects of life within the classroom at different times.

Difficulty and Interest Levels of Work

Shortly after her arrival at secondary school it seemed that, in general, Emily felt that at least some of the work she was encountering in class was less challenging⁵⁷ than it had been at primary school: whereas in Phase 1 she had given a rating of 'definitely true' to the statement 'We have to learn things that are too hard', in Phase 2 she rated this same statement as 'mostly not true'.

At first, schoolwork seemed less challenging, but by the end of Year 9 Emily judged it to be comparable.

⁵⁴ See, for example, references in the research literature review by McGee et al, 2003. Refer p.12 for details about this review.

⁵⁵ Participants in the *Competent Learners @ 14* study were also asked to rate these factors. (For the website address for this study, refer footnote 40.)

⁵⁶ While this may unfortunately have diluted somewhat the informative power of the data collected, there appeared to be no viable alternative: that is, it would not have been feasible to ask students to rate each of their classes at secondary school individually.

⁵⁷ It is possible that use of the word 'challenging' here may change the meaning and be misleading — that is, if Emily thought some of the work in Year 8 was inappropriately *difficult*, rather than 'challenging', with its more positive connotations.

Exhibit E: How students indicated their views of overall classroom learning environment at each phase of the study

The aspects or dimensions of classroom learning environment that students rated
We do interesting things in class
We do lots of fun things as a class
We have to learn things that are too hard
We have to learn things that are too easy
We have to learn about too many boring things
We move around the class a lot when we learn
We often go to the library to do research
We go outside to do some lessons ^a
We go on class trips ^a
We have to sit still most of the time and keep quiet
We do a lot of talking/discussing in class
The teacher(s) ask for our opinions a lot
The teacher(s) listen to/use our ideas
The teacher(s) tell us what to do most of the time
The teacher(s) tell us off a lot
We laugh a lot when we are learning
We try new or different things
Sometimes other kids in the class take the lessons
Students help each other
We work in pairs or small groups
It is easy to ask the teachers for help/to get the teachers to help us
The teacher(s) make sure everyone understands
It takes a long time for everyone to quieten down and get to work
It is hard to work in class because it is too noisy or disruptive
<p><i>Students rated these statements using the following scale:</i></p> <p>1 = <i>Definitely true</i></p> <p>2 = <i>Mostly true</i></p> <p>3 = <i>Sometimes true, sometimes not true</i></p> <p>4 = <i>Mostly not true</i></p> <p>5 = <i>Definitely not true</i></p>

^a For Phases 2–4, the wording of this statement ('We go outside to do some lessons') became: 'We don't always have to do our lessons in the classroom — eg, we go outside to work or go on class trips. The option 'We go on class trips' used in Phase 1 was therefore omitted in subsequent phases.

Emily became more critical about the intrinsic interest value of what she was learning.

But by the end of Year 9, and again in her first term in Year 10, it seemed that Emily was once more finding a considerable proportion of her work to be challenging, albeit, perhaps, still not quite to the same extent as she had in Phase 1.

Although Emily mostly found that her work became more challenging as her first year at secondary school progressed, there were times when she found

it 'too easy'. This was more often true near the end of Year 9 than it was quite soon after transition. However, in Phase 4, Emily was again much less likely to say that she was experiencing work that was too easy. This was similar to her response in Phase 2: that is, at about the same time in a new school year.

As time went on, Emily was also more critical about the intrinsic interest of at least some of what she was

learning in class: whereas in Phases 1 and 2 Emily answered ‘mostly true’ to the statement ‘We have to learn about too many boring things’, in Phase 3 she gave a rating of ‘definitely true’. In Phase 4, however, Emily returned to her earlier rating of ‘mostly true’ on this dimension. And for a fuller perspective on how she viewed this aspect of her classroom learning, Emily was also of the opinion that they mostly learned about interesting things in class at each phase of the study.

Views about ‘Classroom Environment’

Emily’s ratings of aspects of ‘classroom environment’ per se, according to various dimensions in Exhibit E, suggest that, on the whole, she was very positive about many of her experiences of learning in class both before and after transition. For example, at each phase of the study, she rated the statement ‘We laugh a lot when we are learning’ as ‘definitely true’ (although this may say more about student dynamics than anything to do with what and how they were learning in class!).

Emily’s positive ratings about classroom environment fit well with her other feedback about enjoyment of school and with teacher reports of her ‘optimistic outlook’, for instance. However, it was also evident that while Emily mostly found what she was learning interesting, learning in class at secondary school generally seemed to her to be a little less fun and less flexible compared to primary school. In particular, she felt there was less use of spaces for learning outside of the classroom, fewer class trips and opportunities to do research in the library during lesson time, and more sitting still and keeping quiet.

Views about Teaching Strategies or Approach

In terms of specified teaching strategies or ‘teacher approach’, on the whole Emily seemed to make little differentiation between her primary and secondary school teachers. For instance, at each phase of the study, she considered that it was ‘definitely true’ that: ‘We do a lot of talking/discussing in class’; ‘The teacher(s) ask for our opinions a lot’; ‘The teacher(s) listen to/use our ideas’, and ‘The teacher(s) make sure everyone understands’. But, in contrast, she felt that, compared to Year 8, there was much less

opportunity at secondary school for students, rather than the teacher, to direct learning.

Some of these responses — especially the one concerning the amount of discussion in class at secondary school — seem to contradict to some extent Emily’s view that students are more often expected to keep quiet in class at secondary school compared to primary school.

This may be an artefact of her having to ‘iron out’ individual class differences in order to make one, overall assessment of experiences in the classroom at secondary school, when, in reality, between-classroom differences are often quite considerable.

However, although it is possible that another explanation of the apparent discrepancy in her answers (above) is that students talk and discuss amongst themselves against a teacher’s wishes, Emily did also report at each phase of the study that it was ‘definitely true’ that students helped each other in class and that students worked in pairs or small groups some of the time.

Views about Classroom Management

In terms of classroom management, Emily reported that her teachers before and after transition spent considerable time reprimanding students in class, especially towards the end of the school year. For example, in each of Phases 1 and 3, Emily considered that the statement ‘The teacher(s) tell us off a lot’ was ‘definitely true’. The fact that Emily also rated the statement ‘it usually takes a long time for everyone to quieten down and get to work’ in the same way, sheds some light on why the teachers were telling them off so frequently.

It is of interest to note here, however, that although Emily gave consistent ratings about students in class taking a long time to quieten and settle down to work, she answered ‘definitely not true’ in each of Phases 2 to 4 to the statement ‘It is hard to work in class because it is too noisy or disruptive’. By contrast, in Phase 1 she rated this as ‘mostly true’. It may be that although there was often some degree of disturbance in her secondary school classes, it was less noisy than at primary school and that, in any case, Emily probably enjoyed the liveliness that accompanied higher noise levels.⁵⁸

There was much to interest and challenge her, but learning was not quite as much ‘fun’.

Emily observed that teachers frequently reprimanded students.

She did not feel disturbed by classroom noise at secondary school.

⁵⁸ But in saying that, it was also clear that other students in the study quite often found that noise levels and general disruption went beyond the acceptable, and interfered with their learning. This is discussed more in relation to ‘All Students’ views on learning in class, and also in discussions about what sometimes made it hard for them to learn — Chapters Five and Fourteen.)

All Students

Their views on aspects of learning in class at each phase of the study

The table below shows how students rated the various dimensions listed to indicate how they found learning in their classes overall at each phase of the study. A short discussion of the data then follows.

Aspect of classroom/ learning environment	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3		Phase 4	
	Definitely/ Mostly true ^a %	Mostly/ Definitely not true ^a %	Definitely/ Mostly true %	Mostly/ Definitely not true %	Definitely/ Mostly true %	Mostly/ Definitely not true %	Definitely/ Mostly true %	Mostly/ Definitely not true %
We do interesting things in class	80	3	68	5	54	3	56	7
We do lots of fun things as a class	69	3	59	11	34	9	41	8
We have to learn things that are too hard	39	19	21	39	16	34	13	31
We have to learn things that are too easy	24	28	16	42	14	37	4	40
We have to learn about too many boring things	27	45	27	35	31	23	25	27
We move around the class a lot when we learn	38	24	23	42	25	46	23	44
We often go to the library to do research	65	6	40	22	26	31	32	37
We go outside to do some lessons ^b	49	12	–	–	–	–	–	–
We go on class trips ^b	56	15	–	–	–	–	–	–
We don't always have to do our lessons in the classroom — eg, go outside to work, go on class trips ^c	–	–	30	44	22	49	42	12
We have to sit still most of the time and keep quiet	42	20	44	25	40	21	33	24
We do a lot of talking/discussing in class	78	6	61	7	52	8	50	9
The teacher asks for our opinions a lot	76	4	51	7	47	14	49	10
The teacher listens to/uses our ideas	90	3	73	5	60	12	64	4
The teacher tells us what to do most of the time	66	8	60	7	67	7	54	3
The teacher tells us off a lot	29	31	24	38	25	24	30	31

continued...

All Students

Their views on aspects of learning in class at each phase of the study – continued

Aspect of classroom/ learning environment	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3		Phase 4	
	Definitely/ Mostly true ^a %	Mostly/ Definitely not true ^a %	Definitely/ Mostly true %	Mostly/ Definitely not true %	Definitely/ Mostly true %	Mostly/ Definitely not true %	Definitely/ Mostly true %	Mostly/ Definitely not true %
We laugh a lot when we are learning	52	13	43	14	43	14	38	14
We try new or different things	78	2	69	3	57	5	54	7
Sometimes other kids in the class take the lessons	39	32	23	52	13	66	8	73
Students help each other	84	3	67	12	59	5	63	3
The teacher makes sure everyone understands	89	2	88	3	71	4	76	3
We work in pairs or small groups ^d	–	–	51	10	49	9	44	8
It is easy to ask the teachers for help/to get the teachers to help us ^d	–	–	80	4	64	7	75	8
It takes a long time for everyone to quieten down and get to work	58	15	55	17	55	9	48	15
It is hard to work because it is too noisy or disruptive	35	33	28	42	24	40	23	45

^a In order to allow for more concise presentation of the data over the four phases of the study, the two categories signalling *greatest* agreement have been combined; likewise, the two categories indicating *least* agreement have also been combined. The 'Sometimes true, sometimes not true' rating from the five-point scale that was provided for students has been omitted here, as has reporting of any missing data (which was minimal, ranging from 0% to 3% for any given statement).

^b The dimensions 'We go outside to do some lessons' and 'We go on class trips' were included in Phase 1 only. For the following three phases, these were replaced with 'We don't always have to do our lessons in the classroom — eg, we go outside to work [etc].'

^c As indicated in footnote b, this dimension replaced two of the Phase 1 dimensions in subsequent phases of the study.

^d This particular option was included from Phase 2 onwards.

In general, the data in the table reveal that students in Phase 3 were much less likely than they had been in Phase 1 to say that they did interesting or fun things in class, or that they tried new or different things.

And, although the proportion of students who rated the statement 'We have to learn about too many boring things' as 'definitely' or 'mostly true' remained quite consistent (ie, did not markedly increase) at each phase, at around 25 percent, other data, however, show that students were more likely over time to indicate that they experienced too much boring material in class. That is, the proportion of students who chose the 'sometimes true/sometimes not true' category increased from 25 percent in Phase 1, to 37 percent in Phase 2, 43 percent in Phase 3, and 47 percent in Phase 4. Similarly, the proportion of students who rated this statement as 'mostly' or 'definitely not true' dropped from 45 percent in Phase 1 to 23 percent in Phase 3, and remained at much the same level in Phase 4.

continued...

All Students

Their views on aspects of learning in class at each phase of the study – continued

These data correspond with the comments students frequently made in their interviews that some of what they learned in class was too boring.

Students' ratings for Phases 1 and 3 in particular also indicated that they saw differences in how they were able to interact with other students in class shortly before and almost one year after their transition to secondary school. For example, they were less likely as time went on to say that students helped each other in class, less likely to say they discussed work with their classmates, and less likely to say they laughed while they worked/learned.

The data further revealed that students felt that the ways in which they interacted with teachers underwent some changes: for instance, once at secondary school the students rated their teachers as less likely than their teachers in Year 8 to ask for their opinions or to listen to their ideas. In addition, they felt that, overall, teachers were a little less likely than teachers at their primary schools to make sure that everyone understood the work.

By Year 10, overall student ratings on many of these dimensions were more positive again, although generally not to the same level as they had been when the students were in Year 8.

Pastoral Care

Pastoral care is identified in the research literature as vital to the well-being of students. Reference is also made to the increasingly important part that this plays in the everyday life of schools. Some of the literature shows too that there is often a perception that strong pastoral care is the domain of primary schools in particular.⁵⁹ In addition, there is a fear expressed by some primary teachers and others that the same level of pastoral care may not be available to students in the much larger, and possibly less personal, environment of a secondary school. With this background in mind, we felt it was important to explore the pastoral care experiences of our students before and after transition.

Having Someone at School to Talk to about Problems

She needed to 'get to know' pastoral care staff before she would share problems with them.

When they were in Year 8, we asked our students if there was someone at school they could talk to about problems if they needed to. Emily's response was to identify "friends" as her first port of call, followed by her teacher. She felt comfortable about approaching her teacher ...

"... 'cause she understands everything. She's always there for me when things go wrong. She comforts you."

And it was also evident that because all of her primary schooling had been at the one school, there were a number of other teachers and staff in the school that Emily felt comfortable about approaching for advice and support, especially other teachers in the Years 7 and 8 syndicate.

Once the students were at secondary school, we wanted to know if they had been told by their new school who they could go to if they wanted help or advice, or just needed to talk. Emily advised that they had been provided with this information, and listed school counsellors, Year 9 deans, and senior student peer supporters as support people she remembered being mentioned. But, as she had the previous year, Emily again specified friends as her confidantes of choice:

"My friends — nearly all of them — 'cause they're people who I know well — we share experiences and confidentiality", adding that...

"I'm not ready to go to teachers yet — don't know if they're trustworthy or not."

When we repeated the question in Phase 3 about who they would go to, Emily once more said, as her first choice, that she would go to "My friends, especially four of them — two guys and two girls".

⁵⁹ Secondary schools are, however, more likely than primary schools to have formal pastoral care provisions in place (eg, to employ school counsellors).

However she confided that the previous term she had taken a specific problem to ...

“...[one of] my teachers — she sorted out the [threat of a] hiding [by another student] issue — can trust her.”

Asked if there was anyone else she might go to with problems, Emily mentioned the school counsellor as a possibility, but added:

“I haven’t been to her — no need. [And anyway I] don’t know if I can trust her or not.”

Emily’s comments as a Year 9 student suggest that although she knew there were structures in place in school to assist her with any problems she might have, it was important to her to feel she had had the opportunity to get to know support people, including teachers, first, and make up her own mind about whether she was willing to place any trust in them, especially with anything very close or personal.

By Phase 4, Emily seemed a little more open in her views about accessing support networks in the school. While she first mentioned one of her teachers, and then her friends, as the people at school she would talk to about problems if she needed to, this time she referred to the school counsellor as a definite possibility⁶⁰:

“I haven’t had any need to but I’ve heard she’s real cool.”

Summary Statements on How Emily Experienced School

On the basis of the information provided by Emily, her parents and teachers, Emily’s experiences of and attitudes towards school before and after transition were mostly very positive. Although friends, social opportunities and extra-curricular activities predominated in Emily’s reasons for generally feeling good about school, she also talked about how much she enjoyed learning new things and being challenged in her learning.

The explanations Emily gave for sometimes feeling less positive about school included: misunderstandings with some teachers; not being comfortable about approaching staff she didn’t yet know very well with problems; when she felt work in class was boring, irrelevant and ‘not fun’; unpleasant encounters with other students; and when she had difficulties balancing homework and other schoolwork-related activities with extra-curricular responsibilities and interests. Over the course of the study, relatively speaking, any difficulties that Emily had with school most often occurred in the second half of her first year at secondary school, and not in the first days or weeks following the Year 8–9 transition.

⁶⁰ It appeared that Emily now considered the school counsellor as a source of support because that person had been ‘sanctioned’ by some of her friends/peers; it may also be that Emily’s changed view was because she was considering the possibility of taking up a similar occupation (ie, child psychologist) herself when she was older. As well, Emily was more settled at secondary school generally and felt she was much better acquainted with most people at school than she had been in Year 9. In other words, she was feeling a level of comfort much more like her experience of primary school. (Further discussion about pastoral care in relation to ‘All Students’ is included in the third report on the transition study.)