

4 Focus on the attitudes of students

4.1 The social objectives of schooling

The social objectives of schooling feature strongly among the Common and Agreed National Goals, and efforts towards the social development of young people have long been central to the concerns addressed by schools in all States and in both government and non-government sectors. The policy and curriculum documents of education authorities and the statements of purpose guiding the operation of Australian schools all articulate high levels of commitment to developing in students the skills and capacities to function effectively as individuals and as contributing members of the community.

The social focus of schooling is evident well beyond the philosophy statements of schools, in the approaches and methodologies employed by teachers in classrooms, in the establishment of specific units of work or subjects and in student behaviour policies. It also extends to include efforts to monitor the success of schools in achieving these social objectives. The area of students' attitudes, as they apply to the social objectives of schooling, has been identified as a particular focus for the 1996 *National Report*.

Several States have reported on research undertaken in respect of the social objectives of schooling. Information provided by those States is summarised in Section 4.3 of the *National Overview* and represented in more detail in State chapters. The initial emphasis of reporting, however, will be to summarise the 1996 sample study on the social objectives of schooling undertaken by ACER. The information presented is taken from the summary report prepared following that study.

The sample study defined and described aspects of the social objectives of schooling, obtained information about the extent to which those objectives were being achieved, and investigated the role and influence of schools in meeting those objectives.

From a review of a range of curriculum and policy statements as well as other educational literature, and after considering observations of school policy and practice, the study identified six themes that underlie the social

objectives of schooling contained in the Common and Agreed National Goals, particularly Goals 1, 2, 4 and 5, that are the focus of this investigation. Those six themes, around which the study's questionnaires were organised and results reported, are:

- relating to others and concern for other individuals;
- commitment to community well-being;
- conforming to rules and conventions, observance of the law, the importance of honesty;
- interest in learning, or intrinsic motivation;
- self-confidence; and
- optimism about the future.

Questionnaires were administered in schools to principals, teachers and students, with approximately 350 schools from all States and sectors participating. As there was particular interest in some groups of students, for example, students at risk of leaving school early, the sample was structured so these groups could be looked at in more detail.

4.2 National sample study on the social objectives of schooling

The specific focus of the ACER sample study, *Schools and the Social Development of Young Australians*, was derived from Goals 1, 2, 4 and 5 of the ten Common and Agreed National Goals. Of these four, Goals 2 and 5 are concerned explicitly with personal development, while Goals 1 and 4, relate to broader aspects of social development and are less specific. The study was not intended to encompass other goals concerned with social aspects of schooling such as Goal 6 (the capacity to make informed moral and ethical judgements) and Goal 7 (concerned with citizenship).

Purpose and scope of the study

The broad objectives of the investigation were "to define and describe aspects of the social objectives of schooling, to obtain baseline data on achievements against the selected social objectives and to investigate the role and influence of schools in this regard".

The study was concerned with social objectives relating to "school students' attitudes about themselves (self-confidence and self-esteem), their optimism, respect for others, social competence, awareness and appreciation of

social conventions, motivation, respect for learning and attitudes to lifelong learning". Thus the focus of the study was upon aspects of the goals that relate to the social or socialisation roles of schooling and excluded economic or cultural objectives as well as students' knowledge and understanding of social institutions. It was intended to focus on attitudes or dispositions and "to concentrate on attitudes from the perspective of what is required to enable students to participate as active and fulfilled members of Australian society rather than what is required for students to achieve in education and employment".

The focus of the study was a coherent set of curriculum matters that have long been of central concern to schools. These can be described as the aspects of the school curriculum that address personal, ethical and interpersonal development. Schools do not only teach subject matter or develop instrumental skills; they are necessarily involved in shaping people. Good schools deliberately provide opportunities for young people to develop in these areas.

Methods

The first stage of the project involved a clarification of issues, addressed by reviewing relevant literature, examining curriculum and policy documents, and visiting schools and education system officials. The second stage centred on the collection and analysis of survey data.

The review of existing work identified definitions used, the ways in which aspects of social development were applied in practice and the available measures of the achievement of various social objectives. Case study visits were conducted in 14 schools in three States, representing both primary and secondary schooling across all three school sectors.

A survey involving nationally representative samples of schools, stratified by State, sector and level, provided data on student achievement in relation to the social objectives of schooling. Principals were invited to complete a questionnaire describing school policy and practice and questionnaires were distributed for completion by a sample of ten teachers and a randomly selected class of students at year 5 (primary schools) or year 10 (secondary schools). The samples consisted of:

- 348 schools (although only 324 returned a school questionnaire);
- 2,646 teachers (1,162 primary and 1,484 secondary) averaging 7.6 teachers per school; and
- 8,144 students (3,776 from year 5 and 4,368 from year 10) averaging 23.4 students per school.

Results of the surveys

The surveys of schools, teachers and students are related around common themes, with most of the focus on student responses, as representing the outcomes of the social objectives of schooling. Most of the variation in student responses is associated with individuals and their characteristics, although some variation is associated with schools and the characteristics of those schools.

Relating to others

Over 90 per cent of schools provided specific courses or programs in social education (for example, personal development or life skills) in the primary and junior secondary years. Cross year-level strategies (such as peer-support programs) were reported by 79 per cent of primary schools and 69 per cent of secondary schools. Pastoral care groupings such as houses or home groups were identified by over 95 per cent of secondary schools and 72 per cent of primary schools. 70 per cent of primary schools had programs intended to assist students manage their own behaviour (for example, peer mediation or conflict resolution) and 82 per cent had anti-violence (or no bullying) policies or programs. The corresponding figures for secondary schools were similar: 70 per cent and 80 per cent respectively.

Teachers generally place considerable emphasis on encouraging their students to develop sound relations with others. This is true of their own teaching and the schools in which they teach. At the primary level, teachers indicated a greater emphasis on relations with others than at the secondary level. Overall, the data revealed that:

- at each level the strongest emphasis was on *developing tolerance and respect for others* in terms of their own teaching (90 per cent of primary and 82 per cent of secondary teachers placed a major emphasis on this in their teaching) and in terms of their school as a whole (76 per cent of primary and 64 per cent of secondary teachers saw this as a major emphasis of their school);
- *caring for others* was a major emphasis in the teaching of many respondents (82 per cent of primary and 57 per cent of secondary teachers) as well as a major emphasis of their schools (67 per cent of primary and 46 per cent of secondary teachers);
- a *capacity to work cooperatively* was reported to be a major emphasis in the teaching of 78 per cent of primary and 61 per cent of secondary teachers. The corresponding figures for the emphasis in their schools were 66 per cent and 45 per cent; and

- less emphasis was reported on *skills in interpersonal communication* and listening skills. In primary schools this was reported to be a major emphasis by 57 per cent of teachers (compared to 46 per cent of secondary schools) in terms of their own teaching and by 47 per cent of primary teachers (compared to 30 per cent of secondary teachers) in terms of their schools.

Young people in Australian schools consider issues affecting the way they relate to others as important in their lives, as illustrated by the following patterns of response:

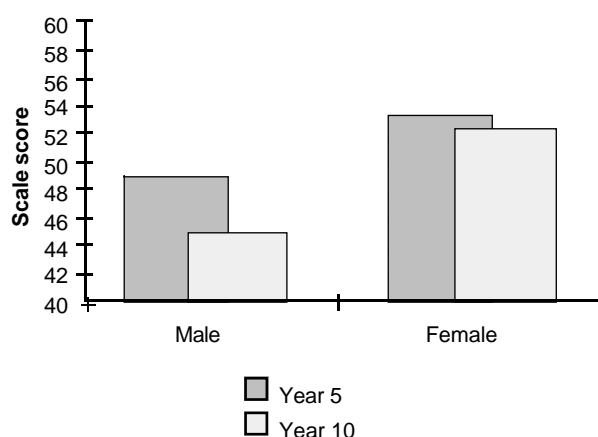
- 70 per cent of year 5 students and 61 per cent of year 10 students thought that *helping a friend who was in trouble* was extremely important to them;
- 64 per cent of year 5 students and 38 per cent of year 10 students thought that *looking after someone who is not well or upset* was extremely important;
- 64 per cent at both year levels considered *accepting someone of a different race as a friend* was extremely important; and
- *helping someone who is less well off than you* was less strongly supported than the items above, being considered extremely important by 40 per cent of year 5 and 23 per cent of year 10 students. However, even for this item, the percentage of students who considered the issue as either fairly or extremely important was 76 per cent and 68 per cent for year 5 and year 10 respectively.

Overall, issues concerning relating to others were a little more important to those in late primary school and were more important to girls than to boys. The gap between girls and boys appears to widen as they move from late primary, where the gap is moderate, to middle secondary school where the gap is quite substantial. This growing difference in orientation, which may reflect developmental processes, is a challenge for schools and school systems. Also important is the information that students who plan to leave school early consider the ways they relate to others as less important than do those who plan to complete their secondary schooling.

Commitment to community well-being

The development of a commitment to community well-being (for example, in relation to world poverty) can raise important issues for schools serving pluralist communities. At a broad level, a consensus that this is valued by its community and seen as something to which schools should contribute might be established, but at a more detailed level programs and policies can generate controversy.

Figure 10. Interaction of gender and year level on relating to others



Source: *Schools and the Social Development of Young Australians*, ACER, 1997

A number of schools provided for values education in the curriculum and in a range of cocurricular activities concerned with community well-being:

- values education was identified as part of the curriculum by 72 per cent of primary and 75 per cent of secondary schools. Religious education was mentioned as part of the school program by 79 per cent of primary and 57 per cent of secondary schools;
- social service work in the community was mentioned by 40 per cent of primary and 74 per cent of secondary schools;
- social service fund raising was identified by 70 per cent and 80 per cent of primary and secondary schools respectively;
- social justice groups such as Amnesty International were present in 13 per cent of primary and 38 per cent of secondary schools; and
- direct contact with other countries and cultures (through student exchange and pen friends) was available through 42 per cent of primary schools and 77 per cent of secondary schools.

Teachers reported placing considerable emphasis on a number of aspects of community well-being in their own teaching and slightly less emphasis being placed on these issues by their schools:

- approximately four-fifths of the teachers at both levels of schooling placed a major emphasis on developing a *respect for the rights of others* in their teaching. In addition, 72 per cent of primary and 65 per cent of

secondary teachers believed that their school gave this aspect of student development a major emphasis in its programs;

- developing *a knowledge of value traditions* was accorded a major emphasis in the teaching of 37 per cent of primary and 32 per cent of secondary teachers. The corresponding figures for teachers' views of the emphasis in their schools were 40 per cent and 32 per cent respectively. This is one of the few areas seen by teachers as receiving greater emphasis across the school than in their own teaching;
- 70 per cent of primary teachers and 53 per cent of secondary teachers placed a major emphasis in their teaching on *developing an understanding and acceptance of non-violence*. The figures for the perceived emphasis in schools were similar (66 per cent and 54 per cent); and
- more than half of both primary and secondary teachers also placed a major emphasis in their teaching on *non-sexist, non-racist understandings*.

In responding to a set of items concerned with community well-being, students were asked to "think about the place where you live" when indicating how important each issue concerning living in society was to them. The responses indicated that, overall, Australian students do think that aspects of community well-being are important to them:

- more than three-quarters of primary (78 per cent) and two-thirds (67 per cent) of secondary students indicated that *protecting children from harm* was extremely important to them;

- 71 per cent of year 5 students and 65 per cent of year 10 students indicated that *making sure that people of all races are treated equally* was extremely important;
- 77 per cent of year 5 students and 58 per cent of year 10 students felt that it was extremely important to *make sure that children have good homes to grow up in*;
- *working out ways to reduce poverty* was extremely important to half (49 per cent) of the year 5 students and just under one-third (31 per cent) of year 10 students;
- *working to help people in other countries* was extremely important to 49 per cent of year 5 students and 22 per cent of year 10 students;
- *respecting people with different points of view* was seen as extremely important by similar percentages of students at each year level (41 per cent and 39 per cent); and
- *helping in community groups* was seen as extremely important by 35 per cent of year 5 students, but just 11 per cent of students in year 10.

Analysis of the scale scores indicated that issues concerned with community well-being were seen as more important by students at the upper primary level than those at the middle secondary level. The difference between the designated year levels was moderate and somewhat greater than that observed for the *relating to others* items. Girls were more likely to see these issues as important than boys, with the gap widening as students move through school.

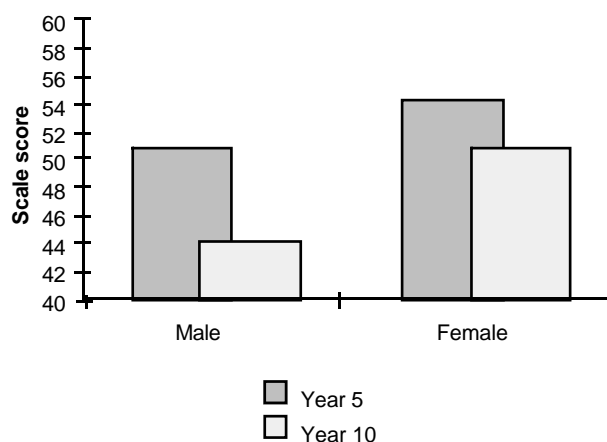
As was found for the issues concerning the objective, *relating to others*, there were moderate differences between those students who plan to leave school early and those who intend to remain at school to complete year 12. Students in the former group rate issues of community well-being lower in importance than do their peers.

The survey also showed that students whose parents were from non-English speaking backgrounds rated these aspects a little more highly than other students. This was evident at both year levels. At year 10, but not year 5, there was a small difference in favour of students from Catholic schools (compared with government or independent schools).

Conforming to rules and conventions

A number of programs in schools are directed towards developing an understanding and acceptance of social rules and conventions, both formal and informal. Student

Figure 11. Interaction of gender and year level on ratings of the importance of community well-being



Source: *Schools and the Social Development of Young Australians*, ACER, 1997

South Australian primary students learning to care for the environment.

involvement in governance (either through a student representative council (SRC), a prefect system or involvement in a school council) has this as one of its purposes. Some 81 per cent of primary and 93 per cent of secondary schools reported student involvement in school governance.

Sport is often argued to have as one of its purposes the development of these social attributes. Competitive sport is widespread in Australian schools: 92 per cent of primary schools and 98 per cent of secondary schools include competitive interschool sport in the cocurriculum. Seventy-nine per cent of primary and 83 per cent of secondary schools also provide competitive sport within the school.

Teachers reported placing considerable emphasis on rules and conventions in their own teaching and noted that these issues were an emphasis of their schools. For example:

- developing a *knowledge of socially appropriate behaviour* was a major emphasis in the teaching of 75 per cent of primary and 65 per cent of secondary teachers. Correspondingly, this was seen as a major emphasis in the schools by 66 per cent of primary and 51 per cent of secondary teachers;
- developing a *sense of social responsibility* was accorded a major emphasis, in terms of their own teaching, by 54 per cent of primary and 50 per cent of secondary teachers, and in terms of their schools, by 53 per cent and 46 per cent respectively;
- similar percentages of teachers to those identified in the preceding point (that is, approximately half) indicated that a major emphasis was placed on developing *respect for the law* in their own teaching and in the school; and
- *training in leadership* was reported to be a major emphasis in the schools of one-third of teachers and in the teaching of only one-fifth of the teachers.

The survey indicates that, even though Australian students generally think that conforming to rules and conventions is important to them, for all items the importance ratings were considerably lower for secondary than primary students. More than half the year 5 students considered each of the items to be extremely important to them but fewer than half of the secondary students rated any of the items as extremely important. In other words, year 10 students placed considerably less importance on the issues raised by the items than year 5 students. The results which follow illustrate this difference:

- primary school students felt that respecting and obeying society's laws was very important. *Respecting society's rules and laws* was considered to be extremely important by 72 per cent of year 5, but only 32 per cent of year 10 students. Similarly, *obeying society's laws* was rated as extremely important by 71 per cent of year 5 students but only 29 per cent of year 10 students;
- a similar pattern was evident in relation to personal honesty. *Being honest when buying or selling things* was extremely important to 67 per cent of year 5 students but only 41 per cent of year 10 students;
- *telling the truth even when it may hurt you* was extremely important to 63 per cent of year 5 students compared to 29 per cent of year 10 students; and
- least importance was given to *controlling one's temper when angry*. This was so for both primary (extremely important to half the students) and secondary students (extremely important to one-quarter of the students).

Analysis of the scale scores showed a substantial difference between year 5 and year 10 students in the importance given to conforming to rules and conventions. Moderate differences were evident between girls and boys: at year 5 the difference is far less than at year 10. This widening gender gap is similar to, but a little smaller than, that observed in terms of community well-being.

Students who plan to leave school early place significantly less importance on conforming to rules and conventions than their peers who intend to complete year 12.

Interest in learning

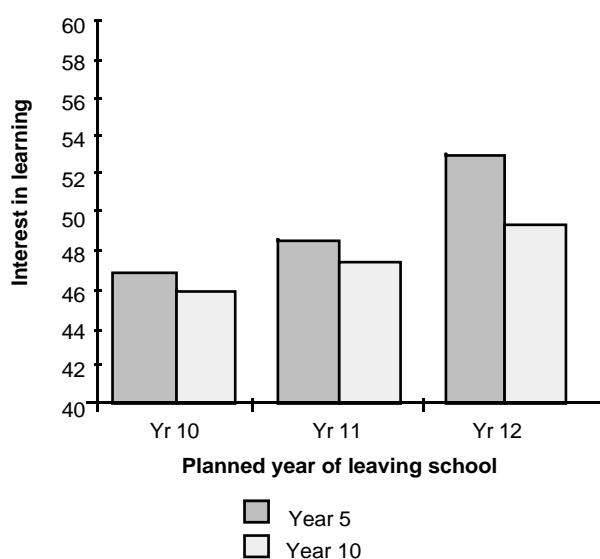
Fostering respect for learning and developing a lifelong commitment to learning are widely held goals within Australian education. Student interest in learning involves a broader orientation to learning than that represented by student responses to any particular area and can be seen as a precursor of a continuing commitment to lifelong learning:

- a number of cocurricular activities and programs are provided in schools to enrich learning environments in ways that expand learning beyond the immediate curriculum. By their very nature these activities offer challenges to engage with new experiences and develop new understandings. Schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh awards, mathematics competitions and tournament of minds programs were provided in a number of schools and 64 per cent of primary schools and 85 per cent of secondary schools provided the opportunity to take part in some form of these activities at one or more year levels;
- the expressive arts are a domain through which schools provide enrichment. Musical activities in the form of bands, choirs and orchestras were present in 90 per cent or more of schools. These tended to be available across all year levels. Some 75 per cent of primary schools and 95 per cent of secondary schools made opportunities for drama or debating available at one or more year levels. In secondary schools these were available across all year levels, but in primary schools they were more frequently available for the older year levels; and
- in addition, some 56 per cent of secondary schools and 37 per cent of primary schools made clubs for leisure activities available to their students. These covered a variety of different interests and tended to be offered across year levels rather than at particular year levels.

In the survey, teachers rated the emphasis they placed in their own teaching on objectives of development of respect for and self regulation of learning. They also rated the same issues from the point of view of the school. At both the primary and secondary levels, “working hard” and “respect for learning” were more frequently given a major emphasis than other purposes (for example, commitment to lifelong learning, intellectual independence and critical/reflective thinking). These objectives generally received a little more emphasis at primary than secondary level:

- *working hard* was seen as a major emphasis of their own teaching by 71 per cent of primary and 64 per cent of secondary teachers. It was seen as a major school emphasis by 59 per cent of primary and 44 per cent of secondary teachers;
- developing *respect for learning* was a major emphasis of 64 per cent of primary and 57 per cent of secondary teachers. The emphases of their schools were rated just a little lower: 57 per cent and 44 per cent; and

Figure 12. Association between interest in learning and planned year of leaving school



Source: *Schools and the Social Development of Young Australians*, ACER, 1997

- a *commitment to lifelong learning* was a major emphasis in the teaching of 44 per cent of primary and 38 per cent of secondary teachers. The corresponding figures for their perceptions of the emphases of their schools were 40 per cent and 25 per cent respectively.

Overall, Australian students reported being interested in and committed to learning. Well over one-third of the year 5 students were extremely interested in these aspects of learning, while for year 10, the number expressing extreme interest was generally in the order of one-quarter. For both year levels the items concerning learning new skills and improving skills after starting work drew the strongest level of interest. Some of the patterns emerging were:

- a little more than half of the students (59 per cent) of year 5 students, and a little under half of the year 10 students (45 per cent) were extremely interested in improving skills after starting work. Similar percentages of these students expressed extreme interest in learning new skills after they had started work;
- finding out how something works attracted extreme interest from just under one half (48 per cent) of the year 5 students and around one quarter (26 per cent) of year 10 students. Similarly, the prospect of learning new things attracted extreme interest from 46 per cent of year 5 students but only 30 per cent of year 10 students; and

- more generally-oriented statements such as thinking about why the world is in the state it is and finding out why something happened the way it did, attracted extreme interest from a smaller percentage of students in both year 5 (35 per cent) and year 10 (approximately 24 per cent).

Analysis of the scale scores helped to indicate whether there were different levels of interest in learning associated with student and school characteristics. Primary school students in year 5 expressed stronger interest in learning than did secondary school students in year 10. There was very little difference between girls and boys in year 5 in terms of their interest in learning and, among year 10 students, no significant difference was evident.

It is not surprising that students who plan to leave school early expressed significantly less interest in learning than those who plan to complete year 12. However, it should be noted that these items are about learning in a variety of contexts and not just in educational institutions. It has been customary to note the strong association between earlier achievement and school completion. These data, although not longitudinal, suggest that the association with interest in learning may be almost as strong.

Self-confidence

Probably the most widely accepted characterisation of development through the years of primary and secondary schooling is as an expansion and consolidation of a sense of self. Referred to variously as self-esteem, self-concept, sense of self, or identity, this construct is essentially dealing with the individual's sense of their own abilities, achievements and worth within their social world.

From the school survey there was information concerning a number of activities and programs that indicated attempts to support student self-confidence either on an ongoing basis or at particular points in school:

- 69 per cent of Australia's secondary schools use cross-year level strategies through which students can support other students. The best known, and most widely used, of these strategies is the Peer Support Program. In secondary schools it most frequently involves students from years 10 and 11 as well as years 7 and 8;
- a similar 67 per cent of secondary schools provide transition programs in years 7 or 8, to enable students to feel comfortable in a new secondary environment; and
- pastoral care groupings such as houses and home groups are present in most secondary schools.

Teachers rated the emphasis they placed in their own teaching on the development of various characteristics associated with self-esteem and self-confidence and rated the same issues from the point of view of their schools. At both primary and secondary levels, "self-esteem", "self-confidence", optimism" and "personal excellence" were more frequently accorded a major emphasis than "initiative and enterprise" or "resilience". For example:

- *self-confidence* was accorded a major emphasis in teaching by 71 per cent of primary, and 57 per cent of secondary, teachers. Some 50 per cent of primary teachers and 36 per cent of secondary teachers saw the development of self-confidence as being a major emphasis of their schools. The pattern for *self-esteem* was similar with 76 per cent of primary, and 59 per cent of secondary, teachers saying that this was a major emphasis in their teaching. The corresponding figures for self-esteem as a major emphasis of schools were 59 per cent for primary and 44 per cent for secondary schools;
- *personal excellence* was considered to be a major emphasis in the teaching of two-thirds of teachers, with no difference between primary (68 per cent) and secondary (66 per cent) levels. Primary teachers tended to see this as a major emphasis in their schools a little more frequently than secondary teachers (57 per cent compared to 49 per cent);
- *resilience* was a major teaching emphasis for one-third of the teachers (36 per cent in primary and 31 per cent in secondary) but was a little more frequently seen as a major emphasis in primary schools (30 per cent) than secondary schools (20 per cent); and
- just under half the teachers placed major emphasis on *developing initiative and enterprise* through their teaching with no difference between levels (47 per cent primary and 45 per cent secondary). At both levels teachers considered that they placed a greater emphasis on these aspects of schooling in their own teaching than did their schools overall (35 per cent and 28 per cent).

Australian students on average appear to have a positive image of themselves as capable of meeting challenges and striving to be successful, although considerable variations were revealed by the survey data. For example:

- 84 per cent of year 5 students mostly or almost always thought that they would *reach their goals in life*, and 85 per cent mostly or almost always thought that *they did well in the things that mattered to them*. Among year 10

students, the corresponding percentage for each these two items is 80 per cent and 90 per cent respectively;

- some 60 per cent of year 5 students and 51 per cent of year 10 students mostly or almost always thought that *near enough is not good enough*; and
- the highest level of confidence was the 56 per cent of primary school students who said that they almost always *feel good about my future*, and the lowest level of confidence was the 12 per cent of secondary school students who indicate that almost always *other people think a lot of me*.

Scale scores were analysed to reveal any differences in ratings of self-confidence associated with any of the measured student characteristics. Primary school students in year 5 appear to have a little more self-confidence than secondary school students in year 10, but the difference was minimal. Girls express slightly more self-confidence than boys, but the difference is less than on other scales for girls in both year 5 and year 10.

In terms of many of the social objectives investigated in the present study, intending early school leavers scored lower than their peers who intend to complete secondary school. The difference between year 10 leavers and school completers indicates a medium to strong effect. The difference in self-confidence between Indigenous students and other students widens between year 5 and year 10. There was no difference in the self-confidence of Indigenous students and other students at year 5, but at year 10, the self-confidence of Indigenous students was significantly lower than that of other students.

Optimism for the future

In a real sense, much of what schools do has a future orientation because they are concerned with preparing young people to participate in future society and providing them with the capacity to shape that future. The Review of the Queensland School Curriculum adopted as the title of its report "Shaping the Future" and devoted a chapter to incorporating a futures perspective into the school curriculum. In the present study it was decided to link attitudes to the environment with orientations to the future. Of course, issues concerned with the future are far wider than environmental issues but the environment looms large as a focus of educational objectives and is often linked to considerations of the future.

Teachers were asked to rate a number of aspects concerning orientation to the future, in terms of the emphasis that they

placed on these issues in their own teaching and the extent to which they felt their school regarded these issues as important. Responses revealed that:

- 56 per cent of the teachers in primary schools indicated that they placed a major emphasis on "knowledge of/respect for the environment". In addition, 51 per cent of the primary teachers reported that their school did so. Fewer secondary school teachers (41 per cent) and their schools (29 per cent) placed a major emphasis on knowledge of and respect for the environment;
- approximately one-third of teachers (34 per cent primary and 30 per cent secondary) indicated they placed a major emphasis on developing *a capacity to cope with change* in their own teaching. Twenty-eight per cent of primary teachers and only 18 per cent of secondary teachers and somewhat fewer secondary teachers saw this as a major emphasis of their school; and
- developing *a belief that it is possible to make a difference* was a major emphasis in the teaching of two out of every five teachers (41 per cent primary and 38 per cent secondary). Somewhat fewer teachers reported that their school placed a major emphasis on this objective (35 per cent primary and 27 per cent secondary).

Items in the student questionnaire concerning students' views on the future and the environment involved students rating a series of the statements on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The items began with the common phrase "in the future". For all items year 10 students reported less optimism for the future than students in year 5. By way of summary:

- the most optimistic outlook on the future was shown by primary school students in their responses to the item, *in the future we will look after the environment better*. 41 per cent of year 5 students strongly agreed with this statement and a further 31 per cent agreed with it (making a total of 72 per cent in agreement). Among year 10 students, only 10 per cent strongly agreed with the statement but a further 33 per cent agreed with it (making a total of 43 per cent in agreement);
- year 10 students indicated little optimism in terms of general orientation statements such as *in the future our world will be better for most people* and *in the future there will be less conflict and war*. Only 26 per cent of secondary students were in agreement with these statements (made up 21 per cent who agreed and 5 per cent who strongly agreed). Year 5 students were more

optimistic, with overall agreement levels of 59 per cent (20 per cent strongly agreed) and 57 per cent (32 per cent strongly agreed) respectively for these two items; and

- year 5 students saw themselves as more actively shaping the future than their year 10 counterparts. Some 61 per cent of year 5 students were in agreement (21 per cent strongly agreed) with the statement that in the future people will be able to shape what they do. In comparison, 43 per cent of year 10 students (10 per cent strongly agreed) were in agreement with the statement.

Analysis of the scale scores confirmed that primary school students in year 5 were considerably more optimistic about the future than secondary school students in year 10. Only 18 per cent of year 10 students scored above the average for year 5 students. Differences between girls and boys were only small and in different directions at the two levels.

Students with both parents from a non-English speaking background responded more optimistically than did those from an English speaking background or with one parent born in a non-English speaking country. At the year 10 level the difference was slightly less than at year 5.

School environments and social outcomes

Part of the student survey invited students to rate some aspects of their school environment. Those items formed two groups, one (the majority of items) concerned with school as a supportive, secure and caring environment and the other (a few items) concerned with the existence of rules proscribing unacceptable behaviour. The scale formed from the first group of items formed a statistically reliable and consistent scale.

Student-rated school environments as reflected by this scale were positively associated with the social outcome measures described in the preceding section. For five of the social outcome measures (relating to others, community well-being, rules and conventions, interest in learning and self-confidence) there was a moderate difference between the lowest and highest school environment quartiles. The effects of school environments on these outcomes were just a little greater for year 5 students than for year 10 students. Differences in school environments had a much smaller effect on optimism for the future, indicating that schools have less of an influence on this than other social objectives. In general, associations such as these suggest important areas for further investigations of the influence of schools on student social development.

Summary

The social development of young people has long been a central concern of schools and this concern is recognised in many statements of education policy. The ACER sample study clarifies some of the social objectives behind broadly stated purposes of schools in this area. It envisages social objectives as comprising six dimensions: relating to others, community well-being, rules and conventions, commitment to learning, self-confidence, and optimism for the future. The data gathered as part of the study indicate various practices of schools to support these objectives, the extent to which teachers emphasise them in their teaching and in their schools more generally and, most importantly, the extent to which students are imbued with a sense of the importance of these issues for their lives. The student responses indicate changes in outlook between year 5 and year 10 on many (but not all) dimensions, differences between girls and boys and associations with other student characteristics such as educational plans.

4.3 Other research and additional data

The ACER sample study summarised above is the key source of information on student attitudes as they apply to the social objectives of schooling for this 1996 report, but it is by no means the only source. States reported research activities and detailed current efforts in each school sector towards achieving the social objectives of schooling. Detailed reporting may be found in State chapters, with the examples reported below providing a sample of the breadth of work occurring nationally.

Victoria reported on Turning the Tide, a comprehensive drug reform initiative functioning in all schools, with the support of parents and community agencies, to address the use and misuse of drugs by young people. Reports of activities within the individual sectors indicated that:

- government school pilot Community Relations and Education projects addressed discrimination, racism and violence in schools and the broader community;
- Catholic schools reflected many of the approaches to the social objectives of schooling evident in other Australian schools, with a strong focus on imparting Christian values; and
- the efforts of independent schools to meet the social objectives of schooling included community programs, ethics and citizenship courses and addressing the special needs of students in the middle years.

Reporting from Queensland included results from the Educational Outcomes project, a study centred around a survey of almost 35,000 senior secondary students from 144 government schools to collect information on the quality of learning experiences and on student perceptions and attitudes. The large number of students surveyed allowed considerable disaggregation of outcome information for analysis in terms of key student criteria, with a strong focus on reporting information in respect of year 12 students.

Each school participating in the research project received a report showing the data for the school, together with benchmark information. This provided the school with an opportunity to understand the current perceptions of students, both in absolute and relative terms, as well as a pathway for planning and future development.

Government schools in South Australia identified strategies to improve and continue to monitor student attitudes, which were revealed in 1996 from a number of sources, and which included:

- *Senior Secondary School Students in South Australia: Attitudes, Achievements and Destinations*: this study examined and reported on student skills and perceptions. It indicated some gender-based perception differences, a generally high priority given to academic results and job skills and a lower priority given to the social objectives of schooling by students in more academic courses. Students' attitudes to schooling were generally positive;
- the *Gender and School Education Report*, which had gathered information from 60 South Australian schools: it provided a further source of information on the impact gender has on a student's capacity to learn and adequately prepare for life after school;
- six Adelaide schools took part in the Alienation during the Middle Years of Schooling Project, which identified common understandings about student alienation and proposed a direction for future action; and
- the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which presented a number of findings identified as important.

Information came from independent schools through extensive sampling. All sampled schools rated the social objectives of schooling very highly, fostering them in an environment which strives to be caring and generally supportive of Christian values. In terms of assessment, monitoring and reporting, many sampled schools reported specific strategies in areas such as student interaction with

peers, participation in life education programs, responses to behaviour management and harassment programs, the use of check lists of social skills and of goal setting with students. It is evident from the sampled independent schools that plans are in place for the ongoing review and development of objectives and strategies which relate to the social development, attitudes and actions of students.

Catholic schools in South Australia directed resources to several programs or curriculum areas that relate to the social objectives of schooling, with Religious Education the key curriculum initiative. Also important were the Family Life Education curriculum, a Behaviour Management Program and an extensive social skills program in primary schools. The success of the latter was reflected in the self-learning which occurred for teachers and the enhancement of the partnership between home and school, which led to gains in the quality of relationships between students, teachers and parents. A very extensive range of other programs and activities helped enhance the social skills of students and to develop their own sense of well-being.

Material provided from Western Australia indicated the importance of social skills among the outcomes targeted as key outcomes for government schools, based on a view that those schools must prepare students for life in a changing, less-certain world, where social cohesion would rely increasingly on individual responsibility. Some information on student attitudes and perceptions, in many ways reflecting the findings of studies referred to earlier, was provided from the 1996 customer survey.

Independent schools in the State generally highlighted and promoted their focus on developing student skills in relation to social needs and issues. A diverse range of integrated programs exist to provide students with a sound basis for the development of their own life skills and values. Schools and teachers recognise that outcomes are being achieved through changes in attitudes, actions and behaviours of students, with growth evident in areas such as students' self-esteem, respect and acceptance of themselves and others.

In Tasmania, a Supportive School Environment policy applied in government schools to encourage positive student behaviours, with individual schools developing their own practices to meet the common goal. A forum on dealing with violence, the provision of key teachers with increased knowledge and skills in behaviour management and the trialling of the *No Fear* kit were among the specific initiatives undertaken in 1996. A particular focus was also reported on very young children, with all kindergarten

children participating in the Kindergarten Development Check, which includes a 'social behaviour and play' category and provides for appropriate intervention for students at risk.

Information provided by independent schools as part of their national reporting process indicated that all surveyed schools included one or more objectives relating to the social development of students, with those objectives often expressed in terms of commitment to community service, development of positive character traits and relationships with others. Schools with a religious focus often included the relationship with God in expressing these goals, while

others with strong ethnic or indigenous links also fostered awareness of that particular culture and its importance in multicultural Australia.

Recognising the more abstract nature of social objectives, most schools' assessment in these areas included teacher observation, discussions with teachers and parents, analysis of enrolment and attendance patterns, conduct of surveys and monitoring community opinion. The findings of this monitoring were generally reported to parents, students and management bodies. They also formed an integral part of schools' structured processes for strategic planning and review.