**Abstract**

This paper reports on the changing perceptions of the educational experiences of students as they move through the school system in one secondary school in South West England. As part of a longitudinal study students were asked to express their thoughts and feelings about life in Year 8, which is considered by some as a year in which little progress is made and there is a 'falling off' of attitudes to learning. Students were asked to give their opinions about their learning experiences in Year 8, and whether they still enjoyed the subjects they had been looking forward to prior to transfer to the secondary school. They were also asked for the reasons they attributed to doing well or not doing well at school. Their views about the usefulness of homework were sought, and they offered ideas of how they thought its' usefulness could be improved. The results revealed that the majority of students in this large secondary school did not feel that they were 'marking time' and that they were working harder and learning more than they did in Year 7. In this respect these findings did not support those of previous studies concerning students' commitment and motivation to their learning in Year 8. The research revealed gender differences with regard to their perceived reasons for doing more or less well at school and to what they attributed success or failure in their learning.

# Marking time or moving on: Student perceptions of school life in Year 8 and their attributions for their success and failure in learning

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## Introduction

Although we now know a great deal about student reactions to transfer from one school to another (Measor & Woods, 1984, Galton, Morrison & Pell, 2000;), much less is known about the changing perceptions of the educational experiences of students as they move through the secondary school system. Year 8 in particular has come to be regarded by some commentators as a 'lost year' when students tend to sit back and take a moratorium on learning before gearing themselves up once more for the serious business of preparing for GCSE exams in Year 9 (Rudduck, Day & Wallace, 1997; Demetriou, Goalen & Ruddock, 2000). But what do the students themselves think and feel about their experiences in Year 8? Do they consider that little learning is taking place, that they are being given a 'breather' and aren't being stretched? Do they still enjoy secondary school after the initial excitement and enthusiasm generated by their new surroundings has worn off? In particular, do they still enjoy the subjects they first thought they would? What are the reasons that they attribute to doing well or not doing well at school? And what are their feelings about homework? Do they see this as helpful to their learning and, if not, how do they think its usefulness could be improved?

The study to be described sought to find answers to these and related questions as part of a longitudinal study of students' changing perceptions of school life in one fairly large comprehensive school (school student population: 1300) situated in a rural town in the South West of England. The reactions of students in Year 7 following their transfer from their 'feeder' primary schools have been documented in a previous article (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005).

As many educational researchers have argued, a great deal of helpful information can be gained from seeking students' reactions to and reflections on their experiences in schools. (Nieto, 1994; Cook-Sather, 2002; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004b). There are obvious advantages and disadvantages of different methods of collecting such data (MacBeath et al, 2003) with the main tension being between the amount (best served by questionnaires) and depth (best served by interviews) of information sought. In this study we were concerned to gather the opinions of the whole Year 8 cohort of students whom we had previously surveyed in Year 7.

This was mainly because we were interested in the stability and change in students' opinions and attitudes which we felt could best be served by longitudinal data. We wanted to examine whether there was a falling off in pupils' attitudes to learning as suggested by a series of reports by the Chief Inspector for Schools (1996-2003) and the national media as reported by Ruddock and Flutter (2004a). Had the students' commitment and motivation fallen away in Year 8? If so, was this interpreted by those students as being due to the poor quality of teaching as some OFSTED reports appear to have indicated (OFSTED, 2006) Was there a 'flatness' which inevitably followed the newness and excitement of Year 7 or had the enthusiasm with which they had approached the secondary school curriculum been maintained? Were there suggestions that they could make to improve their learning experiences?

One further aspect of the students' perceptions of their learning experiences that we wished to explore was their conceptions of the reasons for their successes and failures in learning. This was partly related to the OFSTED suggestion that teaching tended to be less inspired in Year 8. If this was the case, would it be recognised by the students themselves as a prime reason for their perceived lack of success? However, it was also our intention to draw upon some of the insights offered by attribution theory (Weiner, 1986, 1992) and associated research to understand better the students' perspectives (Bar-Tal & Guttmann, 1981; Little, 1985; Williams, Burden and Al-Baharma, 2001).

At the heart of attribution theory is the simple but potentially powerful message that one of the most significant factors affecting the ways that people are likely to behave is the reasons that they attribute to their successes and failures in life. Although the original theory has been considerably revised and extended in its more recent manifestations, this core element remains (Clifford, 1986; Graham, 1991, 1994). In his early writings, Weiner claimed that there were four main reasons that people were likely to give for their successes and failures in achievement situations, namely ability, effort, task difficulty and luck. However, more recent research has led to a considerable extension of the most commonly cited attributions to include such factors as intrinsic motivation, interest, teacher competence and mood (Fry & Ghosh, 1980; Little, 1985; Weiner, 1992; Graham, 1994; Williams, Burden & Al-Baharma 2001; Williams et al, 2005). It is clear also that the nature of the context and the task or activity to be accomplished also has a part to play (Biddle, Hanarahan & Sellars, 2001; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharma, 2001, Williams et al 2004 ; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2005).

It would appear that considerable variation may be shown between males and females (Whitley & Frieze, 1985; Gaeddert, 1987;Farmer & Vispoel, 1990). There is research also to show that attributions are open to change and that such information may well have important educational implications (Van Overwalle & Metsenacre1990; Weiss et al 1990). With this in mind, it was decided that valuable information might be gained from assessing Year 8 students' attributions for how well they were doing at school and, particularly, whether girls and boys showed signs of differing in this respect.

**Method**

All of the Year 8 cohort (101 boys: 105 girls) were asked to complete a questionnaire by means of a 5 point Likert type scale to items relating to their thoughts and feelings about school life in Year 8. All students were given the option of choosing not to take part, not needing to respond to every item and not needing to identify themselves on their response papers, although an indication of their gender was requested. Although every student responded in some measure, the number of responses to each item did vary somewhat and it was not always possible to detect the gender of every respondent. Some items also provided the opportunity for more than one response to be given. This explains the different number of responses presented in the tables which follow.

Each questionnaire item will be presented separately with the responses of girls and boys and those of unknown gender given both independently and combined. These will then be summarised as percentages and a brief comment made where clear differences appear to arise.

**Results**

***I think that I'm learning better than I did last year.***

| | YES | yes | ? | no | NO | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boys | 19 | 58 | 12 | 2 | 0 | 91 |
| Girls | 22 | 45 | 16 | 10 | 3 | 96 |
| Unknown | 10 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 19 |
| Total | 51 | 108 | 30 | 13 | 4 | 206 |
| % | 24.8 | 52.5 | 14.6 | 6.3 | 1.9 | |

Here we can see that over 77% of the students felt that they were learning considerably better (YES) or somewhat better (yes) in Year 8 than they were in Year 7. However, closer analysis shows that these perceptions were much stronger amongst the boys (84%) than amongst the girls (70%), with about 7% of the girls refuting the statement compared with just over 1% of the boys.

***I have to work harder in Year 8 than in Year 7.***

| | YES | yes | ? | no | NO | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boys | 21 | 52 | 11 | 2 | 3 | 89 |
| Girls | 23 | 38 | 15 | 13 | 7 | 96 |
| Unknown | 7 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 17 |
| Total | 51 | 96 | 28 | 17 | 10 | 202 |
| % | 25.2 | 47.5 | 13.9 | 8.4 | 5 | |

Here again the vast majority of students (72.7%) considered that they were working much (25.2%) or somewhat (47.5%) harder than in Year 7. However, a clear discrepancy is evident between the impressions of the girls (63%) and the boys (82%) as to how hard they were working. Further light on these findings is provided in the responses to the following statement.

***I think the work in Year 8 is just as easy as it was in Year 7.***

| | YES | yes | ? | no | NO | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boys | 10 | 21 | 20 | 25 | 13 | 89 |
| Girls | 10 | 21 | 22 | 32 | 4 | 89 |
| Unknown | 3 | 3 | 5 | 8 | 3 | 22 |
| Total | 23 | 45 | 47 | 65 | 20 | 200 |
| % | 11.5 | 22.5 | 23.5 | 32.5 | 10 | |

Here we can see that only 34% of the students considered the work in Year 8 to be just as easy as in Year 7, whilst nearly 43% denied that this was the case, although some 24% weren't entirely sure**.** Boys and girls hardly differed at all in this respect. This suggests that the difficulty level of the work requirement is not the only factor at play here.

The following statement was intended to assess the level of stress felt by students in reaction to extra work requirements.

***I find I can cope with the extra work in Year 8.***

| | YES | yes | ? | no | NO | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boys | 18 | 40 | 19 | 10 | 4 | 91 |
| Girls | 14 | 51 | 17 | 5 | 4 | 91 |
| Unknown | 5 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 20 |
| Total | 37 | 97 | 40 | 18 | 10 | 202 |
| % | 18.0 | 48.0 | 20.0 | 9.0 | 5.0 | |

Here we can see that the extra hard work does not appear to be troubling unduly the majority of the students, as some 66% considered that they could cope without too much difficulty and only 5% appeared to be really struggling. Again there is very little difference between the girls and the boys in this respect.

In order to look more closely into factors contributing to the students' perceptions of their learning progress, we included a subsection of the questionnaire on their thoughts about homework, beginning with the following statement:

***I think homework is very helpful in my learning.***

| | YES | yes | ? | no | NO | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boys | 6 | 14 | 14 | 25 | 30 | 89 |
| Girls | 4 | 17 | 27 | 19 | 28 | 95 |
| Unknown | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 7 | 19 |
| Total | 12 | 34 | 45 | 47 | 65 | 203 |
| % | 5.9 | 16.8 | 22.2 | 23.2 | 32 | |

Here we can see that more than 55% of the students did not consider homework to be helpful to their learning compared with just under 23% who felt that it was helpful. Here the strength of the boys negative views (61% NO/no) was significantly greater than that of the girls (49% NO/no), although the percentage of positive views only differed slightly.

The students were subsequently asked to suggest ways in which homework could be made more useful. This produced 124 positive suggestions from the boys and 155 from the girls, although a large number of responses (60 from boys, 54 from girls) indicated that this was either not possible or that the best way was not to have any homework at all. These suggestions are summarised in the discussion section of this paper.

Although it is clear from these responses that a significant majority of the year 8 students in this school considered that they had worked harder and were learning better than in the previous year, we wondered whether this was at the expense of their enjoyment of school, particularly in view of their negative views about homework. Several further items on the questionnaires were directed at exploring their feelings about different aspects of school, both formal and informal.

***I have enjoyed Year 8 more then I enjoyed Year 7.***

| | YES | yes | ? | no | NO | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boys | 40 | 38 | 8 | 3 | 1 | 90 |
| Girls | 45 | 36 | 7 | 6 | 1 | 95 |
| Unknown | 11 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 19 |
| Total | 96 | 78 | 16 | 11 | 3 | 204 |
| % | 47.1 | 38.2 | 7.8 | 5.4 | 1.5 | |

The vast majority of students of both sexes make it clear that they have enjoyed their time in Year 8 more than in Year 7, for almost 50% considerably so.

***There have been lots of interesting new things to learn in Year 8.***

| | YES | yes | ? | no | NO | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boys | 18 | 41 | 17 | 9 | 4 | 89 |
| Girls | 15 | 40 | 24 | 15 | 1 | 95 |
| Unknown | 3 | 7 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 19 |
| Total | 36 | 88 | 46 | 26 | 7 | 203 |
| % | 17.7 | 43.3 | 22.7 | 12.8 | 3.5 | |

A clear majority of students of both sexes consider that there have been lots of interesting new things to learn, although the girls are slightly more equivocal about this.

One further question related to the consistency of student preferences for certain curriculum subjects. How well, for example, do the subjects students had looked forward to learning retain their appeal over time?

As is shown in a later section, the main reason that both girls and boys attribute to doing well in school is likely to be related to some aspects of the work or subject being studied. In a previous study (Chedzoy & Burden 2005) it was revealed that children tend to have clear expectations about which subjects they will enjoy most at secondary school. It is of potential significances for us to know whether those expectations are borne out or whether subject preferences will change as the students move into adolescence. With this in mind, the students were asked whether they still enjoyed the subjects they were looking forward to, and which were their favourite subjects.

The students were subsequently asked to nominate up to 3 favourite subjects, with the following results.

***I still enjoy the subjects I was looking forward to.***

| | YES | yes | ? | no | NO | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boys | 17 | 38 | 20 | 11 | 3 | 89 |
| Girls | 15 | 35 | 27 | 14 | 4 | 95 |
| Unknown | 3 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 17 |
| Total | 35 | 78 | 52 | 27 | 8 | 203 |
| % | 17.5 | 39 | 26 | 13.5 | 4 | |

These results indicate that whilst more than 50% of the students still enjoyed the subjects they were looking forward to, nearly 20% no longer felt so positive and about a quarter of the population felt unsure of the subjects' continuing appeal. There was slight tendency for boys to feel more satisfied than the girls in this respect.

***Favourite subjects***

| | **% Responses** | | **No of Ratings** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Subject** | **Girls** | **Boys** | **Girls** | **Boys** |
| Art | 22.4 | 17 | 57 | 44 |
| Drama | 22.8 | 15.6 | 58 | 40 |
| Physical Education | 15.8 | 18.3 | 32 | 47 |
| English | 11.8 | 8 | 30 | 21 |
| Music | 9.8 | 9.7 | 25 | 25 |
| Science | 5.5 | 7.4 | 14 | 19 |
| Design Technology | 3.9 | 6.2 | 10 | 16 |
| Maths | 2.7 | 5.5 | 7 | 14 |
| History | 2.7 | 4.3 | 7 | 11 |
| Geography | 3.1 | 1.9 | 8 | 5 |
| Information Technology | 1.5 | 3.9 | 4 | 10 |
| French | - | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Religious Education | - | - | - | 1 |
| Total | | | 254 | 256 |

Of particular interest here is the indication that by far the most popular subjects for both sexes are 'foundation' subjects which involve active participation and little or no writing or recording. The spread of preferences tends to be somewhat wider for boys than for girls, with the 'top three' subjects (Drama, Art, Physical Education) accounting for some 58% of the girls' choices, compared with 52% of the boys' choices**.** This is largely in line with the findings of our previous study (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005) apart from the decline in popularity of Design and Technology and Information Technology. This demonstrates how initial enthusiasm for a particular subject can easily dissipate, although no light is thrown on the reason for this.

**Attributions for success and failure in learning**

The students were asked to cite up to three main reasons to account for when they were successful on a learning task and up to three main reasons to account for when they failed to learn something. Overall 483 responses indicating reasons for success were obtained from identifiable girls and boys with the following results.

**Reasons for learning well at a subject**

**Girls**

By far the highest proportion of responses to this question (106/252 = 42%) identified some aspect of the work or subject being studied as being of central importance, including enjoyment of the subject (22%), fun (7.9%), being understandable (5.5%), interesting (6%) and easy work (2.8%). This was followed by the identification of personal attributes contributing to success (27.3%) including trying hard / doing one's best (8.3%), listening (5.2%), concentrating and thinking (8.6%), not talking / behaving well (3.1%), being good at the subject (ability) (1.5%), and being prepared to ask for help (1.2%). Teacher attributes accounted for a further 50 (20.2%) responses, including general and fairly vague reference to 'good' teachers / teaching (13.1%), and more explicit reference to teachers who explain well (5.2%) and display enthusiasm (0.8%). Other factors identified included the opportunity of working with friends (8.7%), lack of distractions and no talking (3.6 %), and a nice working environment (1.2%).

**Boys**

Aspects of the work or subject were again demonstrated as being the most commonly identified factors in doing well (113/231 = 48.9%), the topic / subject itself (16.8%),enjoyment of the lessons (7.8%), lessons made fun (10.4%), interesting work (6%), practical work (3.4%) and easy work (3%). Personal attributes were the second most common set of identified factors (21.6%) including listen well (5.6%), concentrate (3.4%), confidence in own ability (3%) and desire to do well (1.2%). Teacher attributes accounted for a further 18.6% of responses, including general teacher quality (13.4%), explains well (2.6%) and provides a good lesson (2.2%)

**Reasons for failure to learn well at a subject**

**Girls**

By far the highest proportion of responses to this question (131/245 = 53%) also identified some aspects of the work or subject being the reason for not learning well, including hard work which was not understood (19.1%), boring or repetitive work (17.9%), a dislike of the

subject (10.2%), and lots of writing (2.8%). Other reasons given mentioned particular subjects and lessons not having a fun aspect (2.4%).

This was followed by the identification of teacher attributes as being the reason for not learning well (20.6%) including reference to not liking the teacher (11.4%) and teachers being too strict or unapproachable (9.3%). Personal attributes accounted for a further 31 (12.5 %) of the responses, including not listening or paying attention (5.7%) messing around and not concentrating (6.5%). The girls in this study reported that friends affected their ability to learn well (14%) with reference to talking, being moved from or falling out with friends.

**Boys**

As with the girls, aspects of the work or subject were again cited as being the most commonly identified reason for not learning well at a subject (108/225 = 48%), including boring lessons (17.3%), hard work which was not understood (9.3%) no fun element (6.7%) and too much writing (6.2%). A few students (2.2%) mentioned lessons not being relevant to their chosen jobs and particular subjects as difficult to learn (1.3%). Boys secondly identified personal attributes as factors for not learning well in a subject (24%) including mucking around, having a laugh, being stupid (9.8%), not listening/paying attention (6.7%). Rushing work and lack of concentration (4.4%), and not working hard enough because of tiredness and stress were also cited (3.1%). Thirdly teacher attributes accounted for (19.5%) of the responses, including not liking the teacher (17%) and the teacher in their view not being good enough (2.5%). The boys also cited friends as reasons for not learning well at the subject (6.2%) including being with friends (2.6%) or not being with friends (1.7%) and being distracted by friends (1.7%). Some boys also felt that noisy classrooms inhibited their learning (2.2%). The implications of these findings will be considered further in the following section.

**Discussion**

It is clear from these results that the Year 8 students in this large secondary school, at least, did not consider that they were 'marking time'. The majority of them felt that they were working harder and learning more than they did in Year 7. In this respect, therefore, these results do not support the findings of Galton, Gray and Ruddock (1999), who reported evidence of dips in students' motivation and performance in year 8, which was also borne out by reports from national inspections (Ruddock and Flutter, 2004a). Demetriou, Goalan and Ruddock (2000) also reported that many schools were finding that Year 8 was a time

when pupils were less committed to learning and that Year 8 lacked a ‘ clear and compelling identity ‘.

Galton et al (1999) indicated that for a minority of students, even at the end of Year 7, disillusionment was beginning to set in, owing to a combination of factors such as lack of recognition of the importance of peer support and feelings of boredom with what was on offer, and it was suggested that such feelings were likely to grow in Year 8. Our findings run counter to this; to a certain extent, it would seem that the students in this study were being ‘stretched’ by the level and amount of work with which they were faced in Year 8, but not inordinately so, and not to the extent that this was proving stressful to all but a small minority. On the whole, school appears to have become more, rather than less, enjoyable for the vast majority of these students, many of whom felt that there had been lots of interesting new things to learn in Year 8. This leads us to suggest that the organisation and ethos of individual schools should not be overlooked in transfer and transition studies.

Whilst some 50% continue to enjoy the subjects they had been looking forward to, there are indications of a shift in this respect amongst the others. Nevertheless, subjects involving a high degree of active participation which are both practical and creative (Art, Drama Physical Education, Music) remain highly popular in comparison with more academic subjects.

Where the students did express strongly held negative views was with respect to homework, which only a small proportion considered it to be helpful in their learning. This bears out the findings of the Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools 2003/2004 (OFSTED 2005) where it was stated that ‘ The use of homework is good in only one third of schools. The setting of homework remains inconsistent and homework is not always used to extend learning ‘. Certainly the students in this study had suggestions for making homework more useful but here, as elsewhere, boys and girls differed in the emphasis that they gave to ways in which they felt that homework could be made more useful.

**Suggestions to make homework more useful**

Suggestions from the boys included having less of it each night, being spaced from time to time and only when relevant (35%). 24% of the responses included that homework could be made more interesting and fun, with some of the boys (9%) suggesting more practical, visual work and use of ICT. 8% of the boy’s responses suggested homework as most useful for revising for tests. 6% of the responses indicated that they thought teachers should explain tasks more clearly and 6% favoured linking homework more explicitly to lessons. A few boys

(3%) thought it would be helpful to have time set aside in school. Others had views on optional homework, working with, or without others and that all teachers should collect it in.

The girls also felt that the amount of homework and the timing of it was an issue. 25.8% of the responses felt that they needed less of it each night and that it should be set now and again, be relevant and only set when needed. A few students (5%) suggested having more time (for example a week) to focus on a piece of work to produce better quality. The girl's responses (27%) also indicated that homework could be made more interesting, fun and challenging. More homework linked to topic or project work was suggested by some responses (6.4%), with group work favoured by a few (2%). A number of responses by girls (11%) included felt that improvements could be made if homework was set early on in the lesson with proper explanation and it should be followed up in subsequent lessons. It was also indicated by 4% of the responses that teachers should only set homework if intending to mark and give feedback. Other suggestions included more practical work (4.5%), homework set according to ability, only needing resources available to all, and not so much in the summer or on Fridays.

**Gender differences**

One of the most interesting and potentially significant aspects of many of these results is the way in which the perceptions of girls and boys tend to differ. A greater proportion of boys than girls think that they're working harder and learning better than in Year 7, even though they didn't differ in their perceptions of the ease of the work set or in their ability to cope with it. There was little gender difference in their enjoyment of school or in their liking for different subjects, although the girls did show a slight tendency to be less satisfied with the subjects to which they had been looking forward.

It is with regard to their perceived reasons for doing more or less well at learning in school that the similarities and differences between girls and boys is even more fascinating. Whilst both sexes tended to attribute their successes and failures to be mainly related to aspects of the task or subject, these reasons were somewhat more complex than was suggested by the original attribution dimension of 'task difficulty'. With regard to success, it is clear that while fun/enjoyment and interest are of primary importance to girls, together with being able to understand and cope with the work, the nature of the task or topic itself and its practical aspects were of additional importance to the boys. When it came to failure, on the other hand, girls tended to cite task difficulty, the boring nature of the work and dislike of the subject. Boys, by contrast, were less negatively influenced by task difficulty and lack of

understanding than by boring lessons with no fun element and too much writing. This again relates to the OFSTED (2006) report that role play and other oral work has been effective in motivating boys in helping them to focus and motivate them to write, an approach which has proved successful in primary schools(Reay,2003) and which they may have experienced prior to transfer to secondary school.

The most common group of reasons given by both girls and boys for doing well related to personal attributes; both boys and girls cited listening well as important but whereas the girls tended to emphasise effort and good behaviour, the boys focused more on concentrating, having confidence in own their ability, and the desire to do well. With regard to failure, a clear distinction was shown between the boys' identification of a range of negative personal and behavioural attributes and the much lower incidence of personal responsibility taken by the girls. This would appear to be in direct contrast to the oft cited phenomenon of 'self-serving bias' which has come to be seen as predominantly a male attribution (Marsh, 1986; Gaeddert, 1987) and suggests a tendency towards external locus of control in the girls in this sample.

The third most common set of attributions made by both sexes for success and failure in learning referred to the part played by teachers. Here both the girls and boys cited 'good' teachers who explained well as contributing to their successful learning, and mentioned such teacher-related factors as not liking the teachers or finding them too strict or unapproachable as reasons for not doing well. The boys also felt that if in their eyes the teacher was not good enough, it prevented them from learning well. An HMI survey cited in OFSTED (2006) found that boys' attitudes and performance, particularly in writing was more acutely affected than those of girls by mediocre teaching and that boys were less inclined than girls to respond positively to and to learn well in indifferent lessons.

One further factor worthy of future consideration is the less cited but potentially significant impact of the social structure and ethos within the school, particularly with regard to failure to learn. The girls in this study reported that friends affected their ability to learn well, making specific reference to talking, being moved from or falling out with friends; to a lesser extent, the boys also cited friends as reasons for not learning well at the subject. Some 10% of both girls and boys made mention of the negative effect of 'mucking around', behaving stupidly, having a laugh, talking in class and falling out with friends and the boys also felt that noisy classrooms inhibited their learning (See also Williams et al 2004).

What are the implications of these student attributions? There would appear to be several. If most students see the main reasons for their success and failure in learning to be task or activity related, then it will be important for teachers to focus on making tasks interesting and enjoyable and ensuring that students fully understand what they are required to do and are set tasks at an optimum level of difficulty. These principles are very much in line with the concept of mediated learning experience (Kozulin & Rand, 2000), as well as recent research on motivation (Ford, 1992; Dörnyei, 2001).

At the same time, the willingness of students to recognise their personal responsibility for whether they succeed or fail points to effort and behaviour as more significant than ability i.e. the perception that improved learning is highly likely to be due to hard work and good behaviour, although, somewhat surprisingly, this appears to be more common amongst the boys in our sample than amongst the girls.

Thirdly, the students see some aspects of their learning as being outside their control in that they recognise the importance of good teaching; girls in particular can be put off by too strict or unapproachable teachers and boys feel they need to feel they are being taught by teachers they perceive as competent

Thus we find a complex mix of internal and external, but mainly flexible and controllable factors bearing upon Year 8 students' perceptions of their learning progress.

These findings can be seen fitting well with the increasingly popular Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) which suggests that intention to act in a particular way is likely to be dependant upon attitudes towards the activity concerned, the behavioural norms of the group and feelings of personal control. In seeking to help our students remain committed to learning during what can easily become 'fallow' years, it could well be of benefit to bear this message in mind. In this particular school a positive attitude towards learning had been maintained by the majority of pupils throughout Year 8. This had the additional effect of establishing a positive group ethos towards learning in general. However, if the school concerned does not indicate that it is prepared to act in a positive manner in response to the students' articulated views about homework, there is a danger that some at least of that positive impetus may be lost. The issue of feelings of personal control is reflected in the pupils' sense of personal responsibility for their learning outcomes, all of which adds up to a powerful set of behavioural intentions where school based learning is concerned.

## Conclusion

The results of this study have shown that Year 8 is not necessarily perceived by students as a transition year in their educational careers during which they are 'marking time'. The students in this study mainly showed signs of enjoying school, working hard in a stress-free environment and continuing to learn, although they questioned the value of homework as it was currently constituted. They appeared to gain most enjoyment for what might be considered 'less academic' subjects. Factors related to the curriculum subjects themselves were clearly seen as playing a major part in the students' understanding of why they did or did not succeed at learning, but personal attributes were also seen to contribute significantly.

However, some distinct differences were found between some aspects of the girls' and the boys' attitudes towards school and their attributions for not doing well in particular. On the whole, the boys seemed to think they were working harder and learning more than did the girls, and appeared to be more satisfied with the lessons to which they had looked forward. Whereas interesting and enjoyable work which they could understand and cope with was of primary importance to the girls in contributing to successful learning, the actual nature of the task or topic was more important to the boys.

We must emphasise that these findings were obtained in just one secondary school in a rural area of England and may therefore reflect particular aspects of that school rather than those representing year 8 students in general. However, the fact that they run counter to those obtained in other highly publicised studies suggests that more extensive investigations are called for with particular emphasis on factors identified here.

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