

Promoting participation and inclusion at school: A progress report on TSF's *Learning for Life* program

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Introduction

As an organisation involved in assisting the disadvantaged through the promotion of social capability, The Smith Family (TSF) holds firmly to the conviction that education is critical to unlocking opportunities for disadvantaged Australians. The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* (LFL) program is an intervention that provides both material and non-material support to families and children in financial disadvantage (see Zappalà & Parker 2000 for a brief history of the program). A key objective of the program is to make the educational experience of students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds more participatory and inclusive.

In part, the program arose as a result of previous research and needs analysis by TSF that suggested that many students miss out on school excursions and special events because of the costs involved. Studies have consistently shown that many students choose different electives or sporting choices because their families cannot afford the cost and many parents feel anxious about not being able to provide the uniforms and 'extras' that other children can enjoy (Orr 1994; TSF 1997). Other research has found that parents keep children away from school because they cannot pay the required costs of school activities (Grogan 1997). This can lead to the marginalisation of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds within the school community, which may lead to exclusion and victimisation (Brew et al 1996). This can also result in negative educational outcomes, such as early school leaving and lower achievement levels (Ayers-Wearne et al 1996; Brooks et al 1997).

The LFL program aims to assist students become involved in mainstream school activities by being able to participate in excursions and electives such as art, music and woodwork. The program currently supports 16,000 students with a target of 70,000 by 2004/5. A key value of the program is that by giving children from financially disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to participate more fully in the education process, their life opportunities and self-esteem will improve and they will

have a better chance of not falling into a cycle of disadvantage.

Our previous research on the program has focused on the relationship between financial disadvantage and educational performance (Zappalà & Considine 2001; Considine & Zappalà 2001, 2002). This paper presents new preliminary data on what students on the *Learning for Life* program think about its effectiveness in enhancing their ability to participate fully in their school life. This forms part of TSF's on-going evaluation of the *Learning for Life* program and forthcoming papers will examine its impact on other areas such as school retention.

Background to the Data

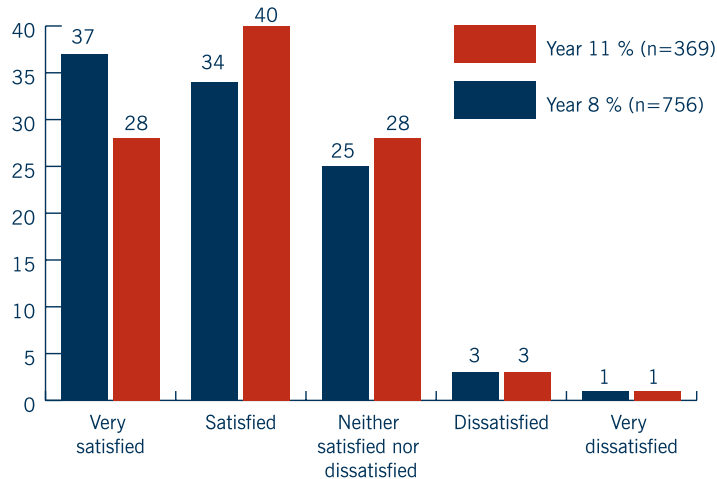
The data presented in this paper were collected as part of The Smith Family's *School to adult life transitions through work and study* project. This is a three-year longitudinal study of LFL and is being conducted with the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT) at the University of Sydney (see Smyth et al 2002). In 2001, the first of three annual surveys was conducted with a sample of students in Years 8 and 11. It was sent to 1959 students in Years 8 and 11 in September 2001.¹ Of these, 1242 were returned, giving an overall response rate of 63 per cent, which is very high for a mail questionnaire.² While the majority of survey questions explored school to adult life transition issues, several questions related to how students felt about aspects of the LFL program. In particular, these questions explored students' assessment of the impact of the program as well as how they felt it could be improved. This paper focuses on how students rated the effect of being on LFL with respect to their ability to attend school excursions, participate in school electives and their self-esteem.³

It should be noted that these findings are *preliminary*, as they are not yet matched with a range of student background data, such as parental education, labour market status, health, age, school, and location. This matching and analysis will occur later in 2002.⁴

Participation in school electives

Students were asked to rate their satisfaction with how the LFL program has helped them participate in school electives. Figure 1 indicates that a sizeable proportion of both the Year 8 and Year 11 cohorts expressed satisfaction with how the program has helped them participate in school electives. Over two-thirds of those in Year 11 (68%) and almost three-quarters of those in Year 8 (71%) stated that they were *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with how the program helped them participate in electives. Overall, this represents 70 per cent of all the students in the study. This is strong confirmation that the program is opening up opportunities and making the school experience more inclusive for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

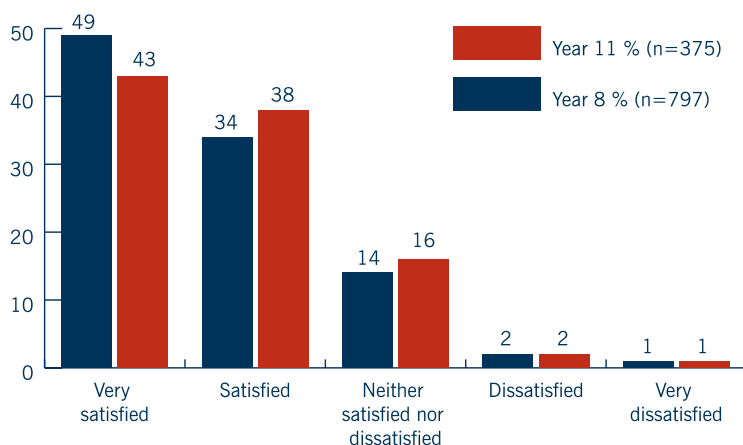
Figure 1 Student satisfaction with how LFL has helped with participation in electives



Participation in school excursions

Students were also asked to rate their satisfaction with how the LFL program has helped them participate in school excursions. Figure 2 shows that over three-quarters (81%) of the Year 11 students and over three-quarters (83%) of the Year 8 students that responded were either *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with how the *Learning for Life* program had helped them participate in school excursions. Overall, this represents 83 per cent of all students in the study. The proportion of students who indicated being *very satisfied* in this question (43 per cent of Year 11s and 49 per cent of Year 8s) was significantly higher than other areas examined in the study, suggesting that LFL is being particularly successful with respect to this objective.⁵

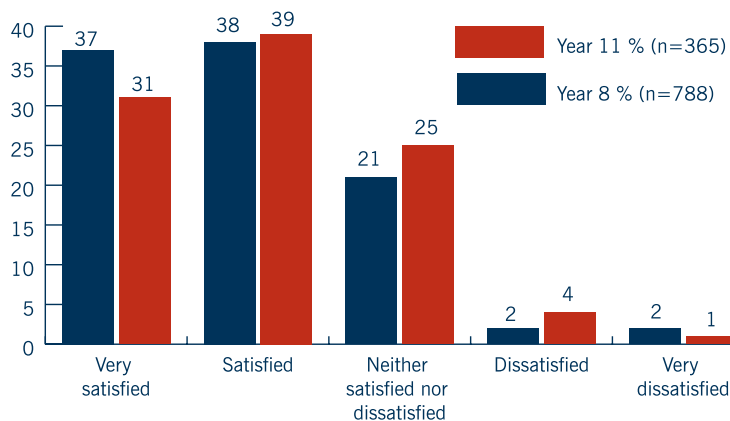
Figure 2 Student satisfaction with how LFL has helped with participation in school excursions



Confidence and self-esteem

A key assumption of the program is that enabling children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to participate more fully in the educational process will lead to an increase in their confidence and self-esteem. Figure 3 suggests that over two-thirds (70%) of the Year 11 students and three-quarters (75%) of the Year 8 students that responded were either *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with how the program had helped them with their confidence and self-esteem. Overall, this represents 73 per cent of all students in the study. This finding seems to indicate that the ability to participate more fully in education has had positive flow-on effects in terms of how students feel about themselves.

Figure 3 Student satisfaction with how LFL has increased confidence and self-esteem



Conclusion

Financial and social disadvantage means that many students are unable to participate fully in the educational process because of the costs involved. Many miss out on school excursions and special events or choose different electives or sporting choices because their families cannot afford the cost. Some parents even keep their children away from school because they cannot afford to pay for certain school activities. This inability to fully participate in the education process can lead to the marginalisation of students within the school community and can result in negative educational outcomes.

Making the educational experience of students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds more participatory and inclusive was a foundational objective of the *Learning for Life* program. A key assumption of the program is that enabling children from financially disadvantaged backgrounds to participate more fully in the education process will lead to an increase in their confidence and self-esteem. Albeit preliminary, these findings suggest that the *Learning for Life* program is making the education process more inclusive and participatory for students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, and this has had positive flow-on effects in terms of how students feel about themselves.

Footnotes

1. This represents 83 per cent of all Year 8 and 11 students on the program at the time.
2. The response rate for Year 8 students was slightly higher than for Year 11 students (65% vs. 60%).
3. More detailed findings are contained in Zappalà et al (2002).
4. Furthermore, the data have not yet been tested for non-respondent bias. While the high response rate suggests that this should not be a great concern, we will be able to confirm that the sample is representative of the total population of students in Years 8 and 11 once background data are available. Internal validity tests of survey responses will also be conducted in due course.
5. Other areas examined included: General program operation and the role of Education Support Workers, retention, educational performance, school to work transitions, and future program development and enhancement (Zappalà et al 2002). Some of these findings will be reported in forthcoming TSF publications.

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