



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Life chances at 15

Resilience and engagement

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Introduction

The paper draws on stage 7 of the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Life Chances Study to look at issues of resilience and school engagement for young people.

Resilience refers to the capacity to do well in spite of adverse circumstances (Gilligan 2000) and is seen as an alternative and positive approach to the focus on the risks and problems that young people face. The Life Chances study has followed the lives of children growing up in the adverse circumstances of low-income families over many years.

Resilience is seen as having both individual aspects but also a social component. Three sources of resilience – a secure base, self esteem and self efficacy – can all be influenced by positive experiences in everyday life. It has been argued that resilience is best seen as an interactive process between the individual and his or her environment (Seaman et al. 2005).

Young people's engagement with school can be an important factor in their resilience in their current lives as well as a key influence on their futures. Lack of engagement with school is seen as a cause of early school leaving. Much research on school effectiveness has focussed on academic outcomes, rather than on how schools engage their students. However researchers argue that dimensions of school engagement, including participation and a sense of belonging, are important school outcomes in their own right that should be seen alongside academic achievement (Fredrick et al. 2004; Willms 2003; Fullarton 2002).

This paper presents some of the results of recent interviews, including a case study to explore:

- What do the young people themselves see as the key influences on their lives?
- What is the influence of family income and other factors on their engagement with school and their future plans?
- What do the findings show about the resilience of disadvantaged young people?
- What are the implications for schools and policy makers?

The Life Chances Study

The Life Chances Study is a longitudinal study of children born in 1990 in inner Melbourne, which aims to explore the social and economic influences on the lives of children as they grow up. The study commenced with 167 children and has followed them and their families over the years as many moved away from the inner suburbs. The families are very diverse including high and low-income families and a range of ethnic groups.

Low family income is often identified as a risk factor for children growing up, especially when it is long term (Taylor & Fraser 2003). In the Life Chances Study low income has been defined as below 120 per cent of the Henderson poverty line (for details see Taylor & Nelms 2006). The low-income families in the study included a high proportion of sole parent families, parents with few educational qualifications, non-English speaking and unemployed parents and large families, characteristics which, especially in combination, made it difficult for them to increase their family income.

For stage 7 of the study, we followed up 41 of the young people as 15 year olds, 15 being the age of the end of compulsory schooling in Victoria. We selected all those who had grown up in families on low incomes (33) and, for comparison, a group of eight who had grown up in high-income families. Data collection included interviews with the young people and their parents and a self-completion 'About Myself' survey. The young people were interviewed about the influences on their current lives, particularly their experience of school, and their hopes for the future.

The report of stage 7 (*School engagement and life chance: 15 year olds in transition*, Taylor & Nelms 2006) is being finalised and will be on the Brotherhood's website in late 2006. We have commenced data collection for stage 8 of the study.

Case study: Hua

Hua (a pseudonym) provides an example of resilience and school engagement in a 15 year old who has experienced considerable adversity. Hua is the Australian-born daughter of Cantonese-speaking refugees from Vietnam. She has lived all her life in a low-income family that has struggled financially.

At 6 months she and her parents lived in inner Melbourne, her father worked in a factory on a low wage. In the next year or so there were early signs of disadvantage with parental conflict. Her mother was depressed and had difficulty in coping with a very active toddler.

At 4 years old her parents had divorced and she was living with her mother who described her as thin and unhappy about her father going. Hua attended preschool, but had learned very few English words. She was looked after by her grandmother while her mother worked part-time.

By 6 years old, Hua's mother had remarried and separated again. The mother and child had spent time in a refuge, which meant Hua missed some school. Both Hua and her mother sometimes missed meals when there was no money, and Hua was underweight and often sick. However she enjoyed school. She spoke Cantonese and was learning Mandarin.

When Hua was aged 11, her mother had lost her part-time job after an accident, was often sick and was worried that she couldn't look after the children well enough. She sometimes didn't have enough money to feed them. Hua, as an 11 year old, described the times when there wasn't enough money: 'That was bad. Because we couldn't have enough for dinner and when our shoes don't fit we don't have money to buy them'.

On the positive side Hua's health had improved and she was very keen about school. Her mother thought she was doing quite well, except that her English was not up to scratch. Her mother had difficulty with costs for the school camp and choir uniform, and had to pay in instalments. Hua's big event was her first school choir concert at the Exhibition building.

In Year 7 she missed a lot of school because of illness, hay fever and taking care of her sister because her mother was having a hard time organising a job.

Aged 15 Hua was still living in a sole parent family, with financial problems, but in many ways she was doing well. They were now in private rental accommodation in an outer suburb.

'Most important: Hua says the most important things in her life at the moment are education and helping out her family financially. She wants to get a part-time job. She also wants to make sure her friendships or problems out of school do not affect her studies.

School: She is in Year 9 in a government school. She is very engaged with school. She actively looks forward to school 'I get to see friends and learn interesting things'. She feels she does better than most students in her class overall and also in maths, and about the same as most in English.

What she liked best at school this year was the 'city campus' and, because she came from inner Melbourne, she had a good time being a leader for once. Her favourite times at school are science and maths and lunchtimes with friends. She feels she has done a good job handling the pressure of studying. However she is not involved in extra curricular activities such as sport or drama: 'I'm not really a performing person'.

She has a few really nice teachers, especially for science and English: 'They seem really friendly and they are willing to help at any time'. The school tries to make students feel they belong: 'they try to be not as strict ... they give you a reasonable amount of freedom ... we have a nice school

environment ... I think my school is great ... reasonably affordable, there weren't a lot of compulsory extra leisure things ... even though there are some like gangsters or bullies at our school, they just don't like randomly attack people'.

School costs: She missed out on school camp because of costs but explained this was not a problem 'because with or without camping I still have as much fun with my friends and out of school as well'. Also: 'I don't need to meet leeches and spiders'. She doesn't go on activities that are too expensive – participating in activities depends on cost and what her friends are doing.

Family: She has moved house four times or so over her lifetime. Her mother is working part-time but finds it difficult to get work in school hours and she doesn't earn much. 'She's a really good mum, and she takes care of us, she's practically been the father and the mother'.

That she and her sister eat a lot is a big problem she says, 'We have to buy a lot of snacks and food and it runs out really fast and in a week it's all gone ... So that's really a thing, my mum is worried about for money'. She has a maths tutor every week, used to have maths and English tutoring but they could not afford both.

Hua's favourite times with her family are Chinese New Year and birthdays 'we have the mood to have fun'.

Friends: She has two close friends at school and a boy friend. He is in same class at school. If upset about something she talks to her boyfriend. She explains that she used to be a negative person but over the year she has been with her boyfriend things have become brighter.

Future: She wants to do Year 12, get 'a part-time job, become independent and get into university'. Now she wants to be a scientist. What she thinks might stop her are pressure and her finance situation.

She says 'My English is not really good for an Australian-born Chinese' so she feels it is important for her to study English literature. She will do VCE Chinese at the ethnic school she attends. She loves Chinese. She would like to teach at her Chinese school'.

Hua's recent school report is very positive: She has As for English, maths, science and Chinese. Also she has been awarded a certificate of merit for outstanding achievement award for her end of year results. Her English teacher writes: 'she has completed an excellent semester's work and has been a pleasant and organised member of the class'.

School engagement

How engaged were the young people in the study with school? The 15 year olds, as a group, were less engaged with school than when they were aged 11 and 12 and those from low-income families were less engaged than those from high-income families. Two from low-income families had already left school, in a rather unplanned way.

While the number of young people is small, the results are quite telling. From the survey, a school engagement score was created which took into account items such as looking forward to going to school, getting on with teachers, enjoying learning, having friends, absenteeism and feeling left out. Only four of the (33) 15 year olds from low-income families scored 'high' engagement, in contrast to half those from high income families. For the 33 low-income 15 year olds the scores showed: four with high engagement (including Hua), 15 with medium engagement and 14 with low engagement (one with developmental delay was not surveyed). In contrast, from the high-income families four had high engagement and four medium engagement.

In the interviews the young people elaborated on their survey responses and talked about the influences on their positive engagement with school including feeling they were doing well academically, having teachers they could talk to, their friends, participating in school sport and other activities.

Hua was one of the most engaged with school of the 15 year olds in the study who had grown up on low incomes and this seemed a key factor in her resilience. School provided her with a context where she enjoyed learning, had friendly and helpful teachers, could participate in (only some) special events and could feel safe with her friends. Her home also provided a quiet place to study as well as a maths tutor.

In contrast to Hua, another capable student from a low-income family was quite explicit about the way one difficulty fed into another at school, illustrating what could be called a cycle of disengagement:

I didn't enjoy school at all [Year 10]. It was just that the classes weren't challenging enough for me and I tended to get real bored and I started to challenge teachers and they didn't like that, so they wouldn't help me. They got angry and I just started wagging school and got into trouble for that.

The same boy felt left out at school and couldn't afford some of the school activities.

Impact of low income

Low family income affected the young people's lives on many levels: at home, at school, socially as well as for their future education and training. It meant missing out on material things many others saw as essentials. It also affected family and social relationships.

At home, young people in low income families could experience housing instability because of the costs of rent or mortgage. Some, like Hua, missed out on food, clothing and also health care. She also missed out on school due to minding her young sister while her mother worked.

Some missed out on school activities such as camps because they were too expensive. This could in turn have impacts on their academic work as well as on their sense of belonging at school. As one boy explained:

Like after you go on camp you've got to do an assessment task on it, and you don't know because you didn't go to the camp. So sometimes you get a really bad mark. [Do they give you a separate assessment?] Sometimes, but mostly they don't.

Families struggled to meet costs of school uniforms, books, calculators and some young people could be punished at school for not meeting these requirements.

Socially some of the young people felt excluded because they could not afford to go out with their friends.

Their futures will be shaped in part by whether they think they can afford the costs of university fees or of other forms of training.

Resilience and school engagement

What do the findings show about the resilience of disadvantaged young people? Hua's strong engagement with school combined with her academic achievement illustrate considerable resilience given the adversity she has faced. However, other young people from disadvantaged backgrounds showed less engagement.

Given resilience is an interactive process between the individual and the environment and school is a key part of a young person's environment we need to ask what can schools do to promote resilience and engagement.

While school engagement is influenced by the young people's family background in various ways, the research literature and the wider findings of this study (Taylor & Nelms 2006) confirm that there are important ways in which schools and policy makers can work to increase the engagement of disadvantaged young people with school.

The following issues seem particularly relevant for each school:

- a climate of inclusion – for young people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, and with different academic abilities
- dealing with costs of activities, equipment and fees so as not to exclude students on low incomes
- dealing with absenteeism (wagging) to avoid a harmful cycle leading to more absenteeism
- listening to students and engaging with them as young adults.

Implications for policy

At the wider policy level the study illustrates the importance of adequate income support for families with teenage children and for the young people who have left home.

Policy issues of particular relevance for 15 year olds such as those in our study include:

- non-academic career options and pathways and ways back into education and training for those who have left, and
- affordable post-compulsory education, including school, TAFE and University.

From the 15 year olds' experiences and from the wider literature on school engagement, the study highlights the importance of promoting school engagement and inclusion in, rather than exclusion from, their schools and further educational opportunities. This involves both promoting a school climate of inclusion and avoiding cycles of disengagement to provide a context to foster resilience.

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Further information

For further information about the Life Chances Study and its publications, see the Brotherhood of St Laurence website <www.bsl.org.au>.

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