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Paul Croll<sup>a</sup>; Gaynor Attwood<sup>b</sup>; Carol Fuller<sup>a</sup>; Kathryn Last<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Reading, <sup>b</sup> University of the West of England,

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# THE STRUCTURE AND IMPLICATIONS OF CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES TO SCHOOL

by PAUL CROLL, *University of Reading*, GAYNOR ATTWOOD, *University of the West of England*, CAROL FULLER, *University of Reading* and KATHRYN LAST, *University of the West of England*

*ABSTRACT: The paper reports a study of children's attitudes to school based on a questionnaire survey of 845 pupils in their first year of secondary school in England, together with interviews with a sample of the children. A clearly structured set of attitudes emerged from a factor analysis which showed a distinction between instrumental and affective aspects of attitudes but also dimensions within these, including a sense of teacher commitment and school as a difficult environment. Virtually all children had a strong sense of the importance of doing well at school. However, a substantial minority were not sure that they would stay on after 16. There were few differences between boys and girls or between children from different socio-economic backgrounds but children planning to leave at 16 enjoyed school less and were less sure that it had anything to offer them. There was an almost universal commitment to the value of education but, for a minority, an ambivalence about the experience and relevance of schooling for them.*

*Keywords: attitudes to school, participation rates, gender, socio-economic status, factor analysis*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we are concerned with children's attitudes to school as they begin their experience of secondary education. The study focuses on 11 and 12 year old children in England towards the end of Year 7, their first year of secondary school. The importance of children's attitudes to school relates first of all to the centrality of school in children's lives. In the present, school absorbs a very significant amount of children's waking time. In addition, their patterns of participation in, and qualifications from, school will influence many aspects of their future lives. The question of how children feel about

school relates to a major current public policy agenda, both in the UK and elsewhere. A worrying proportion of children in the United Kingdom leave school at the age of 16 or shortly after and over ten per cent of 16–18 year olds are not in employment, education or training (DCSF, 2007). This group of young people have almost uniformly negative outcomes on a range of indicators such as unemployment, poor health, teenage parenthood and poverty (Social Exclusion Unit, 1997). Early leavers are disproportionately male and from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. It is therefore very important to establish how children at an earlier stage of their school career feel about a range of issues relevant to participation in education post-16. The importance of children's feelings at this stage is emphasised by the way that early intentions for participation are a good indicator of what the children will actually do later. In a longitudinal panel study of young people, Croll and Moses (2005) demonstrated that what children say at the age of 11 about their intentions for staying in education post-16 was highly predictive of what they actually did five years later.

What children think about their experiences as pupils has been studied in several large scale representative surveys of attitudes to different aspects of school. Relevant studies include Blatchford's (1996) survey of 7, 11 and 16 year olds in London, a series of questionnaire surveys conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (Keys, 1995; Keys and Fernandes, 1993; Maychell, 1998) and a longitudinal analysis of the British Household Panel Survey by Croll and Moses (2005). These surveys have shown a consistent picture emerging of pupil attitudes, particularly with regard to the generally positive responses to schooling. In all these studies a distinction can be found between instrumental and affective aspects of feelings about school. Instrumentally, children tended to see school as important for their futures, saw the value of qualifications and similar outcomes and were prepared to put in effort to achieve these. Affectively, most children enjoyed being at school, liked most teachers and valued friendships and the social experience of school. However, it was also apparent from several of these studies (Croll and Moses, 2005; Keys, 1995) that positive feelings about the value of school were not always accompanied by intentions to stay in education when compulsory schooling ended at the age of 16. A significant minority of pupils either planned to leave at 16 or were not sure of their intentions and many of these had expressed positive views about both the instrumental and affective aspects of school. One of the purposes of the present study is to look in more detail at the sorts of understandings and intentions that might explain these patterns of pupil responses.

While these large scale representative surveys show a generally positive response by children to education and to school, a more mixed, and sometimes rather negative, picture has emerged from other studies using qualitative interview and observation data. In particular, some of these studies focus on specific groups of children and suggest that pupils are highly differentiated in schools on the basis of socio-economic background. In these studies, children from less advantaged backgrounds are often quoted as expressing very negative views of their school experiences and as having low expectations with regard to their performance and likely qualifications (Reay, 2006; Reay and Wiliam, 1999).

There are, of course, problems with the representativeness of these small qualitative studies and the surveys discussed earlier do not support the picture of school as a negative experience for large sections of society. However, in the analysis in this paper we shall be looking at group differences in the responses of children to various aspects of schooling as well as at the structure of these responses.

The research reported here formed part of an ESRC-funded research project into children's sense of their personal futures and the relevance of education to these futures. A questionnaire survey was conducted in 16 schools, randomly sampled within a multi-stage stratification system in six different local authorities spread across England. Stratification was based on post-16 participation rates and success in the GCSE public examination. The 16 schools represented a response rate of 88.9 per cent of the 18 schools originally sampled. A tiny proportion of parents refused permission for their children to take part. Considerable efforts were made to ensure that participation by the pupils was genuinely voluntary but no child was prepared to be left out. Personal interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of 30 children. These were chosen from the high proportion of pupils who had volunteered to be interviewed in order to represent different intentions for educational participation. It was clear both from administering the questionnaires and interviews and from the content of children's responses that they enjoyed taking part in the research and were pleased to be asked for their views.

As part of the questionnaire children were presented with a list of 28 statements relating to their feelings about school and were asked to rate each of them on a five-point scale from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'. The results from this procedure are presented in Tables 1 to 6, simplified to give the extent and strength of agreement with each item. Using factor analysis we have then identified a smaller number of underlying dimensions which structure the responses to particular statements. These dimensions can then be treated as

TABLE 1: *The importance of school*

	Factor loading	Strongly Agree %	Strongly Agree + Agree %
It is important to do well at school	.71	74.2	96.1
If I do well at school it will help me get what I want from life	.76	68.1	91.7
School will help me get the job I want	.76	60.9	89.1
School will help me get good qualifications	.76	66.9	93.7
Most of the things you learn in school are useful for the future	.53	54.6	88.3
What I learn in school will benefit my future	.78	63.4	89.5

Alpha 0.85.

TABLE 2: *Enjoyment of school*

	Factor loading	Strongly Agree %	Strongly Agree + Agree %
I enjoy coming to school	.82	12.4	58.1
I enjoy most school subjects	.73	17.3	67.7
I like most of the teachers	.60	18.1	59.7
School is a good place to be	.73	24.1	64.1

Alpha 0.81.

sub-scales providing measures of particular facets of responses to school.

## 2. THE STRUCTURE OF ATTITUDES TO SCHOOL

In the present analysis six dimensions emerged from the original 28-item scale.<sup>1</sup> These are listed in Tables 1 to 6 where the loadings on the factor analysis are given together with the percentages of pupils who strongly agreed and the combined values for those who strongly agreed or agreed. Quotations from the personal interviews are also used to give a sense of how the children elaborated on aspects of their responses to school.

### *The Importance of School*

The first factor to emerge, presented in Table 1 is *the importance of school*. This can be regarded as an instrumental response to schooling

TABLE 3: Perception of teacher commitment

	Factor loading	Strongly Agree %	Strongly Agree + Agree %
Most teachers do their best for you	.66	33.5	74.9
Most teachers expect me to do well at school	.65	39.7	80.5
Teachers give you credit when you try hard	.71	36.2	74.3
Teachers here respect the pupils	.71	26.7	65.0

Alpha 0.78.

TABLE 4: School as a difficult environment

	Factor loading	Strongly Agree %	Strongly Agree + Agree %
There is a lot of bullying at school	.75	12.9	34.0
School is too noisy	.72	16.8	46.5
There is a lot of hassle at school	.69	12.6	34.6

Alpha 0.67.

TABLE 5: School and friendships

	Factor loading	Strongly Agree %	Strongly Agree + Agree %
I have plenty of friends at school	.79	62.7	90.9
I get on well with other pupils	.76	39.3	86.2
I have difficulty fitting in at school	-0.64	7.0	15.1

Alpha 0.67.

in that it relates to the value of qualifications and success at school and the importance of doing well at school with regard to the future and, in particular, future employment. The six items include, 'It is important to do well at school', 'School will help me get good qualifications' and 'What I learn will benefit my future'. These six items make up a highly coherent sub-scale with a value for Cronbach's Alpha of 0.85. It is also evident from Table 1 that this instrumental aspect of schooling is very highly valued by the pupils. Almost

TABLE 6: *Rejection of school*

	Factor loading	Strongly Agree %	Strongly Agree + Agree %
School doesn't have much to offer me	.55	5.1	16.9
School has too many rules for no reason	.61	15.7	40.7
My parents/carers don't think school is important	.69	4.4	7.0
School has nothing much to do with the outside world	.64	8.7	20.3

Alpha 0.60.

three-quarters of the pupils strongly agreed that it is important to do well at school and almost all either agreed or strongly agreed. The other five items also had very strong levels of agreement with around 90 per cent of pupils saying they agreed or strongly agreed. It is noticeable that, unlike most of the other statements, statements about the importance of success at school provoked particularly strong positive feelings. The great majority of the children said that they *strongly* agreed with these statements while for most of the statements the extremes of the scale were less commonly used than the more moderate 'agree' and 'disagree' ratings.

Clearly this aspect of response to school involves a strong orientation towards the future and a recognition that the things they learn at school and the qualifications they obtain will be very important in determining future employment and future lives:

Getting good qualifications is really important 'cause they last you your whole life. So, I think getting good qualifications is probably the most important thing in my life. (Girl, Asian Bangladeshi)

Education is very important when it comes to certain things in life and if you don't do that good in education you won't really get that far in life. (Girl, Black African)

It also shows that children see their childhood and their school experiences as being, in an important sense, a time of preparation with a clear view of it leading to adult life and employment. They also have a sense that what they do as school children will be a major determinant of the nature of their future lives ('What I learn will benefit my future'). The idea of preparing for adult roles through their school experiences seems very important to the children in the survey:

... me and my friends have a saying which, well, it probably isn't true but we say, if you don't do well you'll end up working in a chip shop ... people that say you don't learn anything at school are wrong, I reckon you learn everything you need for life now, at school. (Boy, White)

A further aspect of the instrumental aspect of the orientation to school is that of trust. As well as seeing that qualifications and the knowledge acquired at school are important, children's responses to this group of questions show a belief that effort and achievement will pay off for them and that the school will keep its side of the bargain ('School will help me get good qualifications'). So the strong positive responses to the questions which make up the importance of school factor indicate an acceptance of a meritocratic view that academic success will be rewarded and that school offers routes to such success.

### *Enjoyment of School*

The second factor to emerge from the analysis and shown in Table 2 is *enjoyment of school*. The four statements to load on this factor relate to school as a pleasant or unpleasant experience. These include 'I enjoy coming to school' and 'School is a good place to be'. While factor 1 was essentially about school as a preparation for the future, factor 2 is about school as an immediate experience. Like factor 1, this is a highly coherent set of items with a Cronbach's Alpha for the four item sub-scale of 0.81. The children were very much on the positive side of the items on this dimension although not in the extremely strong way they were for the instrumental and future orientated aspects of school. As Table 2 shows, nearly six out of ten of the children said that they enjoyed coming to school and about the same proportion that they liked most of their teachers. Over two-thirds of the children said that they enjoyed most school subjects. Considering that school attendance is compulsory and that there is very little curriculum choice at this age, this suggests that most children are relatively happy school participants. However, most of the children giving positive responses are at the more moderate rather than the enthusiastic end of the scale. A substantial majority of children agree that they enjoy school but relatively few are prepared to say they strongly agree that they enjoy school or like teachers. Through interviews some students did discuss, however, that enjoying school was not always because of specific subjects or teachers but because of what school offered on a more intrinsic level: 'I love coming to school because I can be a different person at school'.



*Teacher Commitment*

The first two factors described here are not unlike other accounts of surveys of children's attitudes to school. Previous studies have shown that children are fairly positive about school and have a strongly instrumental sense of its value (Blatchford, 1996; Croll and Moses, 2005; Keys, 1995). However, the third factor, presented in Table 3, has not been considered in previous studies. We have called this, *Perception of teacher commitment*. The statements which load on the scale are, 'Most teachers do their best for you', 'Most teachers expect me to do well', 'Teachers give you credit when you try hard' and 'Teachers here respect the pupils'. Like the previous two factors, these four items make up a highly coherent sub-scale with a value for Cronbach's Alpha of 0.78. The statements describe the extent to which teachers are seen as performing an appropriate professional role in terms of their commitment to their pupils' success, recognition of their achievements and having respectful relationships with children. As one student notes, 'I like it best at the end of a lesson when a teacher just gives you a credit or says well done, you worked well today'. It should be noted that this is not necessarily the same as liking the teachers but as recognising the nature of their role and seeing them as fulfilling it. The implicit distinction between liking school and teachers and seeing teachers as fulfilling professional roles shows a degree of sophistication which may be surprising in children of this age. There is, however, other evidence that perceptions of teacher professionalism is important to children. For example, Attwood and Croll's (2006) study of persistent absentees showed that some of the young people had stopped attending school because, as they saw it, teachers were failing to act appropriately with regard to providing instruction or keeping order.

The figures in Table 3 show that children are generally positive with regard to their perceptions of the way teachers perform their professional roles. Three-quarters agree that teachers do their best for pupils and that teachers give credit for effort and four-fifths agree that teachers expect them to do well. A rather lower proportion agree that teachers respect pupils but this is still two-thirds of all children. These figures are not as high as the ratings of the instrumental value of school but they are rather higher than the values for enjoying the experience of schooling. In particular, the 'Strongly agree' category is considerably higher than those strongly agreeing that they like school. So while children are very positive about the purpose and value of school (factor 1) they are also pretty positive about the commitment of teachers to help them realise these purposes.

*School as a Difficult Environment*

The fourth factor consists of questions relating to children's experiences of the school environment and the extent to which they find the experience of school as a physical and social setting to be personally stressful and disagreeable. This factor is presented in Table 4 and has been labelled, *School as a difficult environment*. This factor is somewhat less coherent than the previous three factors with a value for Cronbach's Alpha of 0.67, slightly below the level of 0.7 sometimes regarded as a cut-off for psychometric purposes. One of the variables making up this factor relates to bullying. This has been shown to be an important element of some children's responses to school in a variety of studies (e.g. Attwood and Croll, 2006; Smith and Sharp, 1994). The question asked in the present study was of their perceptions of bullying ('There is a lot of bullying in this school') rather than of the experience of being bullied. One third of the pupils agreed with this statement and one in eight expressed this as a strong agreement. The perception of school as a socially or personally difficult environment is not only a matter of bullying. In a study of young people who had become disaffected at school, Attwood and Croll (2006) found that it was often the more general atmosphere of the school, a concern about unruly and disruptive behaviour and 'tension' that had alienated many, rather than specific bullying incidents. In the present study these aspects were considered through the statements; 'There is a lot of hassle at school' and the rather more low-key, 'School is too noisy'. Just over a third of the pupils agreed that there was a lot of hassle and almost half said that school was too noisy. In interviews, being physically smaller than the majority of students in school was also a source of anxiety for some:

Everyone gets pushed about. It doesn't matter that we're year seven. The left and right thing doesn't work, especially on the stairs. Nobody pays attention to it. When you are in year six you are at the top of the school but here we are at the bottom ... the older ones don't care, they just push you out of their way. (Girl, White)

You get squashed [in the canteen], especially on a Friday when it's chips. There's a lot of pushing and not enough staff and the queue is very long. It's the bigger kids that push. The bigger ones call us 'year sevens'. It makes me uncomfortable to say anything if I get pushed 'cause they're bigger. Then they shout at us. They call us little children 'hey you! Little girl!' (Girl, White)

The teenagers are massive compared to us, like people who are twenty or thirty. When you're walking you can get knocked down 'cause the big uns can't see ya'. (Boy, White)

Taken together these statements show that the problems of negotiating school as a social environment and the disruption of various sorts caused by the behaviour of other pupils was significant for a substantial minority of the children.

### *School and Friendships*

The other side of school as a difficult environment is school as a socially enjoyable space; a place to make and meet friends and develop social skills and social relationships. Although very different from the previous factor these two aspects of responses to school are not inconsistent. Other studies have shown that children who have been bullied or have other difficulties with fellow pupils, nevertheless usually also have friends at school and value some aspects of the school as a social space (Attwood and Croll, 2006). The fifth factor to emerge from the analysis is, *School and friendships*. The questions which load on this dimension are; 'I have plenty of friends', 'I get on well with other pupils' and, negatively, 'I find it hard to fit in'. Treated as a scale these items have a value for Cronbach's Alpha of 0.67, the same as the previous factor.

A substantial majority of children are positive about school as a site for friendships and social relationships and the view that friends were an essential part of the schooling experience was frequently referred to in interviews, 'they help you get through it. Like, if you are down and you've got a monk on [sulking, in a bad mood] then they help you get through it'. Ninety per cent said that they had plenty of school friends and more than two-thirds of these were in strong agreement. In response to the negative question about finding it difficult to fit in, only 15 per cent agreed and only half of these were in strong agreement. Nevertheless, alongside the very general positive response to the social aspects of school, there is a fairly small group of children who do not have friends at school and find it difficult to fit into the school environment.

### *Rejection of School*

The sixth and final factor in the analysis relates to a group of questions expressing negative views about the nature and purposes of schooling. These questions range from a fairly ordinary statement

about school having too many rules to the statements 'School does not have much to offer me' and 'My parents/carers don't think that school is important'. Positive responses to these statements suggest some degree of rejection by the child or the parents of aspects of schooling and the factor has been labelled *Rejection of school*. This is the least coherent of the factors and the scale of the four items has a value for Cronbach's Alpha of 0.60.

Of course the extent of rejection of school suggested by agreeing with a statement varies considerably across the items. It is perfectly possible to value the central aims of school while believing that your school has too many pointless rules, 'like having your top button done up all the time' and this item has by far the highest level of agreement at 40 per cent. For some students, believing school has too many rules also appeared to reflect negative relationships within school, with some children feeling singled out and victimised. 'They [teachers] don't know what they are on about and, like my tutor, they pick on people for no reason, or, like they pick on just one person for doing what everyone else is doin' ... I'm treated differently to my friends and if they [teachers] got no respect for me then I'm not gonna respect them'. The most extreme item is the statement that the child does not think his or her parents regard school as important. Here only seven per cent of pupils agree and the great majority of the children see their parents as putting a high value on schooling. Although the figures are low, this small minority of children seem to be getting a very negative view of school within their families. About one in six children thought that school did not have much to offer them and one in five thought that school had nothing much to do with the outside world.

### 3. TYPES OF ATTITUDE TO SCHOOL

We can see these six dimensions as falling into two broad groups. The dimensions *importance*, *commitment* and *rejection* are related to the value and purposes of school and are mostly concerned with school as a preparation for the future. The dimensions *enjoyment*, a *difficult environment* and *friendship* relate to the affective and social aspects of school and are mostly concerned with the present. The first group could also be described as an instrumental response to school. Factor 1 describes how far the children see the central purposes of school as important to them and how far they believe that success at school will be rewarded. Factor 3 describes how far they see teachers as committed to supporting them in getting the most out of school. And factor 6 shows the extent to which they reject some or all of the

purposes of schooling. The second group of factors could be described as an affective response to school. Factor 2 describes how much they enjoy school. Factor 4 describes the extent to which they find school a difficult place to be and factor 5 describes how far they are involved with the friendship and social patterns of the school. In summary, school was almost always seen as important and usually as enjoyable. Nearly all children had friends at school but one in three thought there was a lot of bullying. Most thought that their teachers were committed to helping them succeed but a small minority, even at this age, were doubting the relevance of school to them.

#### 4. GROUP DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES TO SCHOOL

In the opening discussion we located attitudes to school in the context of concerns about the rates of participation in post-16 education and, in particular, lower rates among boys and among those from less advantaged socio-economic groups. We can now consider attitudinal differences between boys and girls and children from different socio-economic backgrounds and also between those who plan to leave at 16 and those who plan to stay on. First of all we can establish different post-16 intentions for different groups of children in the present sample.

In Table 7 the expressed intentions for post-16 participation are given for boys and girls and for children whose parents are in non-manual and manual occupations.<sup>2</sup> For the sample as a whole, about three-fifths of children say they want to stay on, about one-fifth say they want to leave and about one-fifth are uncertain about their plans. As we noted above, although the majority of children have already decided, as they begin secondary school, that they will stay on post-16, the figure is not as high as might perhaps have been expected from the positive attitudinal responses, especially responses concerning the instrumental value of school. The figures for different groups in Table 7 show a pattern of differences which is consistent

TABLE 7: *Intentions at 16*

	Stay on %	Not sure %	Leave %	N	Chi square
Boys	56.3	19.9	23.8	391	14.71 2 df
Girls	66.4	19.9	13.7	437	p < 0.01
Non-manual	70.5	16.6	12.9	403	16.6 2 df
Manual	55.3	23.5	2.2	302	p < 0.01

*TABLE 8: It is important to do well at school*

	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %	N	Chi square
Boys	95.7	2.2	2.2	371	1.40 2 df
Girls	96.3	2.5	1.1	438	ns
Non-manual	96.7	2.3	1.0	396	1.0 2 df
Manual	95.3	3.0	1.7	298	ns
Stay on at 16	97.8	1.2	1.0	496	26.04 4 df
Not sure	96.1	3.9	0	155	p < 0.01
Leave at 16	89.6	4.9	5.6	144	

*TABLE 9: I enjoy coming to school*

	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %	N	Chi square
Boys	57.4	23.9	18.8	373	4.17 2 df
Girls	59.0	25.7	16.0	437	ns
Non-manual	61.0	26.2	12.8	397	2.83 2 df
Manual	57.2	25.4	17.4	299	ns
Stay on at 16	65.8	25.2	9.1	497	70.48 4 df
Not sure	51.0	28.9	20.6	155	p < 0.01
Leave at 16	39.6	23.6	36.8	144	

with what we know about differences in actual post-16 participation rates. Girls are more likely to say they will stay on than boys and children whose parents are in non-manual occupations are more likely to say they will stay on than children whose parents are in manual occupations. These differences are both statistically significant.<sup>3</sup> However, it should also be noted that a clear majority of boys and a clear majority of those from manual occupational backgrounds say that they want to stay on and well under a quarter of both groups say that they plan to leave.

In Tables 8 to 13 the patterns of association between selected attitude scale items and other characteristics of the children are presented. Six questions have been selected to represent each of the six dimensions of attitudes to school to emerge from the analysis.<sup>4</sup> The results from these are given separately for boys and girls, children from non-manual and manual backgrounds and for those saying they will stay on and those saying they will leave.

TABLE 10: *Most teachers do their best for you*

	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %	N	Chi square
Boys	78.9	15.1	5.9	370	6.76 2 df
Girls	71.2	19.4	9.4	434	ns
Non-manual	77.0	17.1	5.9	392	1.20 2 df
Manual	74.1	18.2	7.7	297	ns
Stay on at 16	79.5	14.4	6.1	492	18.60 4 df
Not sure	70.3	21.9	7.7	155	p < 0.01
Leave at 16	64.3	21.7	14.0	143	

TABLE 11: *There is a lot of bullying at school*

	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %	N	Chi square
Boys	35.7	33.5	30.8	370	4.25 2 df
Girls	32.3	40.6	27.2	434	ns
Non-manual	34.9	34.1	31.0	393	3.52 2 df
Manual	31.2	40.9	26.8	298	ns
Stay on at 16	34.6	35.5	30.0	494	10.21 4 df
Not sure	25.7	38.8	35.2	152	ns
Leave at 16	39.3	39.3	21.4	145	

TABLE 12: *I have plenty of friends at school*

	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %	N	Chi square
Boys	89.5	4.8	5.6	373	3.53 2 df
Girls	92.0	5.0	3.0	437	ns
Non-manual	91.4	4.8	3.8	397	0.18 2 df
Manual	91.0	5.4	3.7	299	ns
Stay on at 16	92.1	4.4	3.4	496	5.07 4 df
Not sure	91.0	4.5	4.5	155	ns
Leave at 16	86.2	6.9	6.9	145	

The main conclusion to emerge from the analysis is that with regard to gender and occupational background there are very few differences in attitudes to school. No significant differences were found between boys and girls and, in particular, they were pretty

TABLE 13: *School does not have much to offer me*

	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %	N	Chi square
Boys	16.7	22.9	60.4	371	4.55 2 df
Girls	17.0	29.2	53.8	435	ns
Non-manual	11.4	24.8	63.8	395	15.44 2 df
Manual	21.5	26.6	51.9	297	p < 0.01
Stay on at 16	12.7	23.4	63.8	495	39.0 4 df
Not sure	18.1	29.7	52.3	155	p < 0.01
Leave at 16	30.8	31.5	37.8	143	

much identical in saying that school was important and that they mainly enjoyed being there. For most of the attitude items the same is true for children from different occupational backgrounds. Children from manual and non-manual backgrounds were very similar with regard to the importance of doing well at school, enjoying school, having friends at school, awareness of bullying at school and seeing teachers as committed. The small differences in some of these were not statistically significant. However, a statistically significant difference did emerge in the item 'school does not have much to offer' (Table 13). Almost twice as many children from manual as from non-manual backgrounds agreed with this statement and the difference was statistically significant. It is still very much a minority view with only just over one in five of the children from manual backgrounds feeling that they personally were not likely to get much out of school. But the difference between the groups is quite striking and suggests a possible explanation for part of the later differences in participation rates for children from different socio-economic circumstances.

Tables 8 to 13 also show differences in responses to the attitude items for children who have expressed different intentions for post-16 participation. In contrast to the gender and socio-economic groupings, these show a clear pattern of statistically significant differences. Children who plan to leave are less positive about thinking that school is important, enjoying school, believing their teachers are committed to them and thinking that school does not have much to offer. However, they are no different from other children in their perceptions of levels of bullying and, like other children, they have plenty of friends at school. It is important to note that, despite having lower levels of ratings of the importance of school, this is within the context of very high overall ratings of this aspect of schooling. Nine out of ten of the children who plan to leave at 16 say that it is important



to do well at school. The really large differences between the intending leavers and the intending stayers are with regard to enjoying school and believing that school has something to offer them. A majority of those planning to leave are not positively enjoying school and are not positive about feeling that school has something to offer.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis here shows that children of 11 and 12 had well-formed and clear views of their experience of school and that the attitudes to emerge are complex but consistent. There was a basic distinction between instrumental and affective views of schooling but also nuances within these. For example, children had a strong sense of the instrumental value of school but were also making judgements about the extent to which school was committed to them and the relevance of school to them personally. Similarly, their general enjoyment of school also included judgements about the extent of bullying and hassle and an appreciation of school as a place for friendships. The most consistently expressed view was with regard to the importance of doing well at school. The level of support for this aspect of schooling is so high as to give very little scope for group differences. These results match Furlong's conclusion that, '... this increase in educational participation has been facilitated by a process of cultural convergence in which the benefits derived from qualifications are more or less universally acknowledged' (2004, pp. 12–13). Nevertheless, despite this almost universal value orientation, only just over six in ten children were firmly committed to post-16 participation.

There were the expected group differences in intentions with regard to staying on but very few differences between boys and girls or children from manual and non-manual occupational backgrounds with regard to attitudes to school. However, among the small proportion of children who had begun to doubt the personal value of school to them, children from manual backgrounds were heavily over-represented. This result may partially reconcile the marked difference between survey evidence and the results of small-scale qualitative studies discussed earlier. It is not the case that children from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds generally do not value and enjoy school or feel that their teachers do not support or value them. But, in the small sub-set of pupils who are beginning to reject school, children from these backgrounds predominate.

Children who plan to leave school early do not have such positive attitudes as other children but they are certainly not generally negative about school. They see the social aspects of school, friendship and

perceptions of bullying in the same way as other children. Most are positive about the value of school and the commitment of teachers, although not to the same extent as others. The biggest differences are with regard to enjoying coming to school and, for a minority, feeling that school does not offer them much. The results here show clearly that initiatives on participation rates cannot start too early in children's school careers and that changes in, for example, the 14–16 curriculum are likely to be too late in themselves. They also show that virtually all children have a strong sense of the value of education and most have a sense of the commitment of schools and teachers. This clearly forms a basis for improving participation rates and for persuading all children that the value of education can be realised for them personally.

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## 7. NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The procedure used was to carry out an initial principal components analysis followed by a varimax rotation. Examination of the scree plot did not show a clear cut off point for the number of factors and so the default criterion of eigen values above unity was used. Alternative rotation procedures did not show any difference from the varimax solution. Items with a loading of 0.5 or greater were taken to define the factors. Four items did not load this highly on any of the six factors ('I feel a different person at home and at school', 'My parents expect me to do well at school', 'I try my hardest in my school work' and 'I am comfortable asking questions in class').
- <sup>2</sup> The socio-economic classification of the children in the sample is based on their reports of their parents' occupations. These have been divided in the present analysis into manual occupations and non-manual occupations. Traditionally the socio-economic status of children in families has been determined by the occupation of the father. More recently the occupation of both parents has been taken into account and the 'dominance' approach, which has been employed here, involves using the occupation of the parent in the most advantaged occupational category to determine the socio-economic status of the family (Rose and Pevalin, 2003). Of course this means that there is a considerable upward shift in the socio-economic status of the sample compared with the situation if only one parent's occupation was used and well over half of the children have been classified as non-manual. Children in the non-manual group have at least one parent in a non-manual occupation. Children in the manual group have

both parents either in manual occupations or unemployed. Where information was only available for one parent this has been used as the basis of classification.

- <sup>3</sup> Because of the relatively large size of the sample, statistical significance has been set at  $p < 0.01$  for this and subsequent tables and only differences reaching this level of significance will be discussed here.
- <sup>4</sup> An analysis has also been conducted using the mean value of each sub-scale which takes into account all of the items making up the dimension (Croll, 2008). The results from this analysis confirm those of the analysis presented here. The results of specific questions have been adopted in the present paper as they are more readily interpretable.

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### *Correspondence*

Professor Paul Croll  
 School of Education  
 University of Reading  
 Bulmershe Court  
 Earley  
 Reading  
 RG6 1HY  
 E-mail: emscroll@reading.ac.uk