

4.4 Teaching and learning that is relevant

In Western Australia, the School Curriculum and Standards Authority is the body responsible for the development and accreditation of the school curriculum for Kindergarten to Year 12. The curriculum sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills that students are expected to be taught and to acquire across their schooling, regardless of where they live, the sector of school, or their individual circumstances. Curriculum content is important for educational quality and equity across the State and nationally, and for preparing students to be active, productive and successful individuals.¹⁰⁷

Importantly, the curriculum does not stipulate how the content is to be taught. School staff members are expected to develop engaging learning experiences which cater to student learning requirements, needs and interests.

Therefore, there is a difference between the curriculum that is set out for students and their experiences of the curriculum through learning activities. Both are important within education systems. Students' perception on the relevance and value of education influences their engagement in school, learning and learning behaviours. Given these perceptions are partly framed by the curriculum and their learning experiences, listening to student insights into curriculum content are essential considerations for enhancing engagement with school and learning.

Survey findings

- More than one-half of Year 7 to Year 12 students said they feel their learning at school is 'very valuable' to them and their future.
- Students who say that what they are learning at school is very valuable to them are more likely to feel part of their school, to like school, to say being at school every day is very important to them and to achieve high academic results.

Is what students are learning valuable to them and why?

A little more than one-half of Year 7 to Year 12 students (54.0%) reported that what they are learning at school is 'very valuable' to them and their future, and one-third (35.1%) said that it is 'somewhat valuable' to them.

However, one in 10 (9.4%) students in Year 7 to Year 12 said they feel that what they are learning at school is 'not very valuable' or 'not valuable at all' to their future.

There were no significant differences between male and female students, students in regional and metropolitan areas, or Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

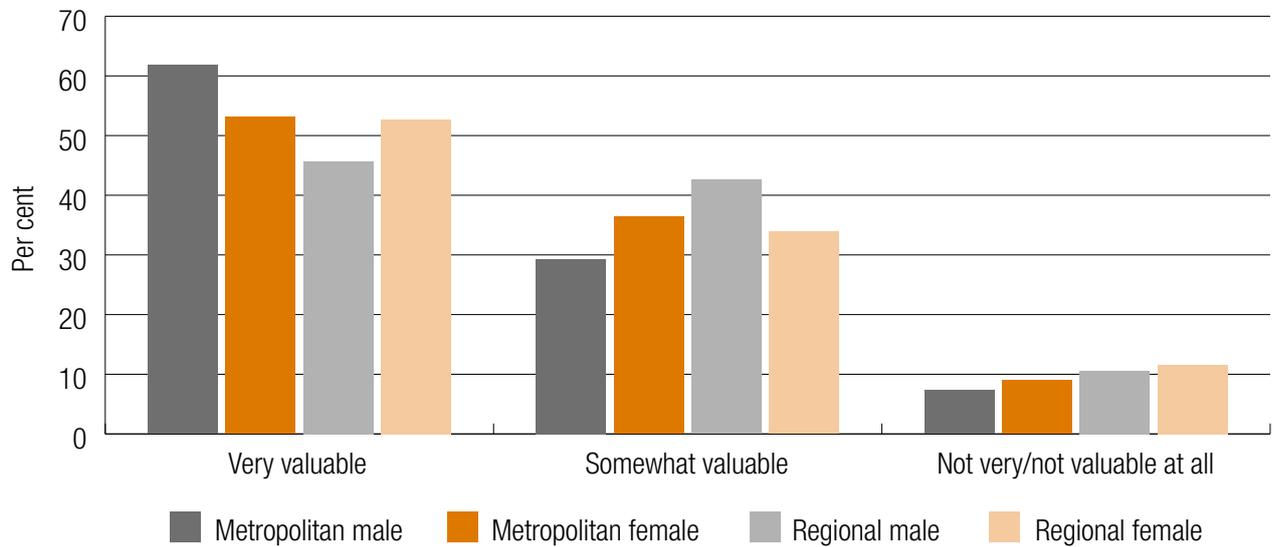
Table 4.9: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students saying what they are learning at school is very valuable, somewhat valuable, not very valuable/not valuable at all or they are unsure, by selected characteristics

	Male	Female	Metropolitan	Regional	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	All
Very valuable	56.5	53.0	56.1	49.3	54.5	45.5	54.0
Somewhat valuable	33.7	35.7	33.8	38.2	35.4	29.5	35.1
Not very/not valuable at all	8.5	9.8	8.7	11.1	8.8	20.5	9.4
Unsure	1.4	1.6	1.5	1.4	1.3	4.5	1.5

A significant regional difference, however, was found within male students. Male students in metropolitan areas were significantly more likely than male students in regional areas to say that what they are learning at school is ‘very valuable’ to them (61.8% versus 45.7%).

The same difference was not found within female students in metropolitan and regional areas (53.1% versus 52.7%).

Graph 4.7: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students saying what they are learning at school is very valuable, somewhat valuable or not very valuable/not valuable at all, by gender and region



The most commonly mentioned reasons for why students felt that what they were learning was valuable to them were job prospects, the ability to do more study and the enjoyment gained from learning.

Table 4.10: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students saying what they are learning at school is valuable for selected reasons, all students saying very or somewhat valuable

Reason	Percent
It will help me get a job	83.4
It will enable me to do more study/go to university	72.5
I enjoy learning	49.0
It’s interesting	45.9
I like and/or respect my teacher	32.8
Other reason	5.0

Year 7 to Year 12 students saying what they are learning has little to no value to them most commonly mentioned ‘other interests’ (60.9%) and the notion that what they were learning at school ‘will not help me get a job’ (48.4%). Some of these students also described difficulties in seeing the relevance or connection between what they were learning at school and the ‘real world’ as well as their dreams and aspirations for the future:

“Up to a certain point in education, it eventually becomes unusable in everyday life. Example, where am I going to use quadratics in day-to-day life.”

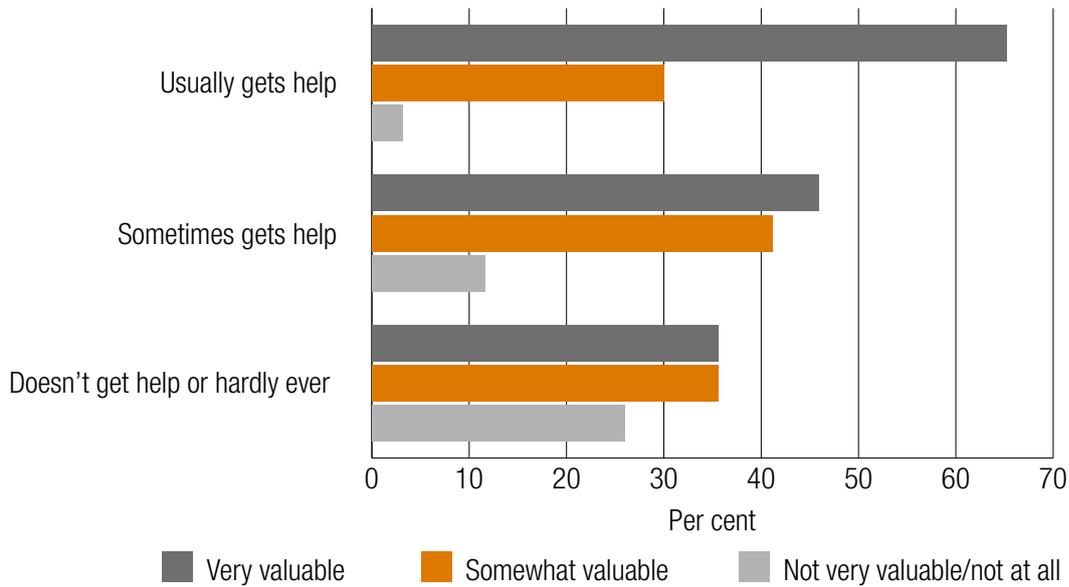
“I would rather be learning about things that are going to help me in the real world.”

“Learning what angles are in a triangle won’t help me be a makeup artist.”

“[...] I don’t know how to do taxes, create a budget. The necessities for being in the world.”

The survey data showed a positive association between the level of help students received and the value they placed on what they were learning. Students who reported 'usually' receiving the help they need to do their school work were significantly more likely to say that what they were learning at school is 'very valuable' to them and their future. On the other hand, students who reported 'never' or 'hardly ever' receiving the help they need were more likely to say that what they were learning at school was 'not very valuable' to them or 'not valuable at all'.

Graph 4.8: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students saying their learning is very valuable, somewhat valuable or not very valuable/not valuable at all, by level of help received



The questionnaire for Year 3 to Year 6 students did not include any specific questions about valuing learning.

Continuation of education until Year 12

In the survey, 25 per cent of Year 7 to Year 12 students answered that they would like to be able to leave school earlier than after Year 12.

A higher proportion of male students than female students said this, however, the difference was not statistically significant (27.7% of male students compared to 21.9% of female students). There was also no significant difference found between students from regional and metropolitan areas or Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Students with positive relationships

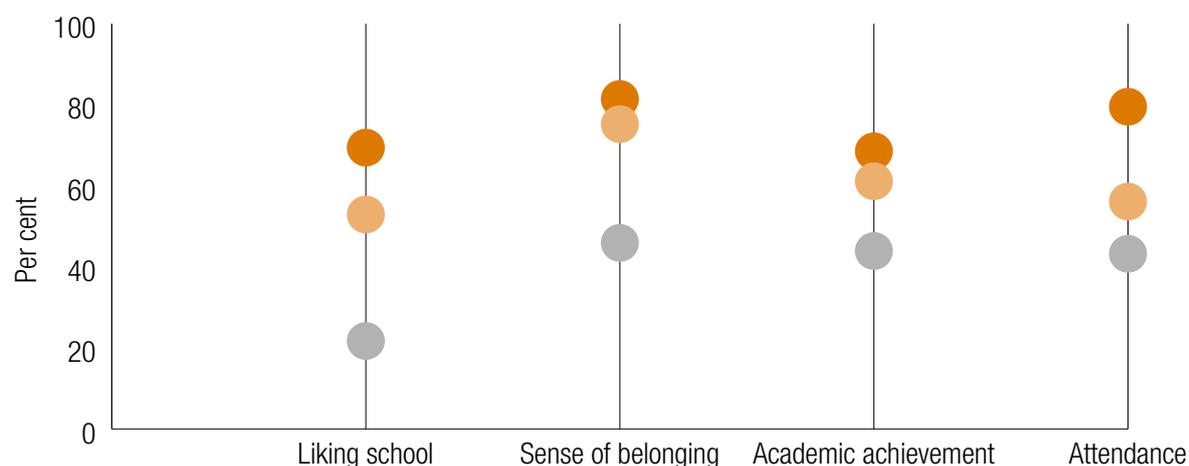
Further analysis of the data gained from Year 7 to Year 12 students showed a positive association between strong student-teacher relationships and the value placed on learning. The same association was found for students with families that are involved in school and learning.

- Students with families that 'often' ask about school work or homework and participate in school events were more likely to say that what they are learning at school is 'very valuable' to them (60.2% versus 45.6% of students with families that 'sometimes', 'rarely' or 'never' ask about school work or homework and don't participate in school events).
- Students who 'usually' get along with their teachers and 'usually' get the help they need for their learning were more likely to say that what they are learning at school is 'very valuable' to them (66.9% versus 47.1% of students who get along 'sometimes' and 'sometimes' get the help they need).

Students who value what they are learning – Year 7 to Year 12

The survey results have also shown that students who said that what they are learning at school is very valuable to them and their future were more likely to feel part of their school, to like school, to say it is very important to them to be at school every day and to achieve high academic results:

Graph 4.9: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students saying they find what they are learning at school **very valuable, **somewhat valuable** or **not valuable****



Note: Liking school includes students who said they like school ‘a lot’ or ‘a bit’, sense of belonging includes students who said they feel like they are part of their school, academic achievement includes students who said they achieve ‘above average’ or ‘near the top’ in their school results and attendance includes students who said it is ‘very important’ to them to be at school every day.

Group discussion findings

“Fun subjects because it can make students more positive about going to school.” (Year 3 to Year 6)

Student enjoyment of particular curriculum content areas was dependent on a range of variable factors. Their inherent interest in the content, the way it was taught, their level of competence and their relationships with those around them all came into play.

Whilst students in Year 3 to Year 6 generally spend most of their day in a single classroom with a single teacher and relatively consistent group of peers, the contexts of engagement for students in Year 7 to Year 12 are more diverse. Students generally participate in a range of curriculum areas, shifting classrooms, peers and teachers – each curriculum area can therefore be situated within different conditions for engagement.

Students enjoyed learning when curriculum content:

- aroused curiosity
- was interesting
- was meaningful
- encouraged creativity
- enabled choice.

Correspondingly, students disliked subjects that were boring, uninteresting or too difficult. The perceived relevance of subjects was particularly important for students in Year 7 to Year 12, given their focus on pathways beyond school. Students in Year 7 to Year 12 also expressed frustration towards the curriculum content offerings available to them, stressing the impact that curriculum offerings have on their future.

Importantly, the factors that influenced student sentiments towards curriculum areas are open to influence. Student interest is malleable and can be shaped by pedagogy, self-belief, competence and relationships.¹⁰⁸ Working in ways to create optimal engagement conditions, as described by students, is likely to increase their overall engagement and encourage students to engage in learning behaviours.

Curriculum content areas

Students expressed both positive and negative sentiments for all curriculum areas. Student's feelings towards particular subject areas were influenced by a range of factors, including inherent interest, approaches to teaching and learning, competence, self-belief in their capacity, their relationships with their teachers and peers, and the perceived purposefulness of the content.

Sport was consistently mentioned as an enjoyable curriculum area for a variety of reasons. Students referred to being physically active as a welcome break from learning and important to be healthy, developing skills, working in groups or teams and being able to play their favourite sport.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>"We need math because then your brain won't think and you need your brain to pop out with ideas on anything."</i></p> <p><i>"Have sports more often because it helps kids be more active."</i></p> <p><i>"More subjects like art and drama so more kids like school."</i></p> <p><i>"I want more history because it teaches me."</i></p> <p><i>"Learn more languages."</i></p> <p><i>"More spelling and maths because they are important and they are very fun subjects."</i></p> <p><i>"I liked football because it meant that everybody could get a run around in the fresh air and sport is better than work (football is the best)."</i></p>	<p><i>"More sport activities during school."</i></p> <p><i>"French – it was challenging."</i></p> <p><i>"I liked music – challenged my mind – I really enjoyed learning an instrument."</i></p> <p><i>"Psychology – interesting – style of teaching – content."</i></p> <p><i>"Bible because you could just debate the whole lesson, science and math because we learn new things."</i></p> <p><i>"Focus on spelling in later years (Year 7+)."</i></p>
<p><i>"To stop boring work like writing, spelling and English."</i></p> <p><i>"No art."</i></p> <p><i>"Less music because it is boring."</i></p> <p><i>"Less sport."</i></p> <p><i>"Maths because I hate it."</i></p> <p><i>"No history."</i></p> <p><i>"Maths because I find it's too hard."</i></p> <p><i>"NO SPELLING because we only need grammar or maybe less spelling."</i></p> <p><i>"NO EDU DANCE please!!! It's terrible."</i></p> <p><i>"Remove science for learning how to speak in French."</i></p>	<p><i>"Subject change – math not compulsory."</i></p> <p><i>"Religion classes they are boring and I'm not Catholic."</i></p>

New and interesting curriculum content

“When you learn something new. (It’s like a new world or a new door to open).” (Year 7 to Year 12)

The results of the survey revealed one of the top three things that students enjoyed about school was learning new things. Through the group discussions students also indicated that learning was enjoyable when they were interested in the content.

Not surprisingly, students had a low level of interest in repetitive, boring or uninteresting curriculum content or when learning experiences were too difficult, influencing their motivation.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“Science because I worked in a group and the group I was in helped me learn something new.”</i></p> <p><i>“When I learnt how to use formulas.”</i></p> <p><i>“When we made damper because it taught me now how to make it (all of us liked it).”</i></p> <p><i>“I like learning new words in spelling and reading it helps me a lot.”</i></p> <p><i>“Noongar dancing was interesting because you learn other dances.”</i></p> <p><i>“Spelling tests because you can learn how to spell words – that you don’t know how to spell.”</i></p> <p><i>“Because I didn’t know so much then (because I like learning new things).”</i></p> <p><i>“Year 1 because I could learn so many new things and we never learnt anything over and over again!!!!”</i></p> <p><i>“LOTE Noongar it was fun because you get to learn other language.”</i></p> <p><i>“Learning new sport.”</i></p>	<p><i>“I found the subject really interesting.”</i></p> <p><i>“It was on a subject that fascinated me.”</i></p> <p><i>“Any time where my interests have a direct link to the lesson.”</i></p> <p><i>“When I learnt a new way to work out a math equation.”</i></p> <p><i>“The fact that we were learning and not repeating what we did last year.”</i></p> <p><i>“Learning new things that are interesting and relatable.”</i></p> <p><i>“New things or ways of learning e.g. Goals program, bricklaying.”</i></p>
<p><i>“Sometimes they don’t like the topic.”</i></p> <p><i>“Least favourite subject.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Uninteresting topics makes us put in less effort.”</i></p> <p><i>“Irrelevant topics are boring.”</i></p> <p><i>“The student not wanting to learn anything about the topic.”</i></p> <p><i>“When students don’t enjoy the subject.”</i></p>

Meaningful curriculum content

Feeling a connection or perceiving a purposefulness in the subject or curriculum content strongly influenced student emotional and cognitive engagement with learning. Students explained that being able to see the applicability of curriculum content to their lives was an important factor in seeing the relevance and value of education.

Learning in relation to their various pathways beyond schooling was critical to students in Year 7 to Year 12 for engagement in learning.

Students in Year 3 to Year 6 referred to the more immediate future of high school and a longer-term view of future careers. Whilst some students perceived their learning experiences as meaningful, many of the comments from students in Year 3 to Year 6 were in response to being asked what they would change about their school suggesting an increased focus on the purposefulness of learning for this cohort is required.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p>Think about a time when you really liked learning at school. Why did you like it?</p> <p><i>“Cooking because it is really fun and teaches you how to write a method.”</i></p> <p><i>“Reading fiction books learning about real issues.”</i></p> <p>If there was one thing you could change about your school what would that be?</p> <p><i>“More reading to develop more learning and get a good job.”</i></p> <p><i>“Less BOMDAS because it is boring and bad I want more spelling because if you’re an adult no one would understand your writing.”</i></p> <p><i>“I want more ART because people want to have art careers and everyone likes art!!!!!!”</i></p> <p><i>“SIM (School of Instrumental Music) lessons for woodwind instruments in primary school as well as high school. So that there is more diverse musical ability.”</i></p> <p><i>“I want more geography so I know the world.”</i></p>	<p>Think about a time when you really liked learning at school. Why did you like it?</p> <p><i>“Maths: because you can get many jobs involving maths.”</i></p> <p><i>“Childcare – get a certificate to work with children. So I can have a future in a daycare or midwifery.”</i></p> <p><i>“When I was doing chemistry and physics and I discovered that I want to study aeronautical and aerodynamic engineering.”</i></p> <p><i>“When I knew it would help me with my dream job – e.g. sport.”</i></p> <p><i>“I love reading and I want to be a writer, so learning about novels and narratives in class was really fun.”</i></p> <p><i>“Help you get a job.”</i></p> <p><i>“Help you go to university.”</i></p> <p><i>“When I know it will affect my future.”</i></p> <p>If there was one thing you could change about your school what would that be?</p> <p><i>“Don’t teach us stuff we don’t need to know like the Ottoman Empire.”</i></p> <p><i>“Be able to choose a level of maths – life skills like finance.”</i></p> <p><i>“Careers Unit – a lesson for learning life skills such as resume writing, applications for jobs and learning how to complete a good interview.”</i></p>

Curriculum content and learning experiences that made connections to students’ lives outside of school also made learning meaningful and therefore interesting.

Students in Year 3 to Year 6 referred to having a greater interest and satisfaction in learning when showcasing their learning to family members, learning with family members or sharing their lives (or pets!) with other students. However, for some students, curriculum content that made connections to their lives outside of school could be a source of stress or sadness. Teacher relationships with students and understanding student background are therefore critical to structure curriculum content appropriately and provide supports around learning.

Students in Year 7 to Year 12 discussed the importance of general knowledge for daily life, for example understanding mathematics for purchasing goods, and also knowledge that developed their sense of identity and awareness, such as learning about different cultures or their own culture, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“Coding going every night to play Tynker and my dad was a coder so he taught me.”</i></p> <p><i>“I like it when we did choir because we get to sing in front of family and friends.”</i></p> <p><i>“When my mum came in.”</i></p> <p><i>“Fun sports because my mum and dad were there.”</i></p> <p><i>“When I got my cat and got to bring it to school.”</i></p> <p><i>“When it includes far away family or dead family [makes it hard for some students to learn].”</i></p>	<p><i>“Food for social occasions because it gives you skills for life.”</i></p> <p><i>“English: because you get to know one of the most popular languages.”</i></p> <p><i>“Woodwork due to you learning how to make things.”</i></p> <p><i>“Learning life skills.”</i></p> <p><i>“So that they can be smart when they grow older.”</i></p> <p><i>“When I began psychology because it’s interesting and is teaching me about me.”</i></p> <p><i>“Doing things that you can bring home.”</i></p>

Students in Year 7 to Year 12 suggested learning could be made more interesting by including certain topics that would be useful for them as young people. Students referred to learning experiences that strengthened their knowledge and awareness of wellbeing and functional knowledge for life beyond school. In particular, they indicated that inclusion of the topics below would increase the relevance and their enjoyment of learning.

Year 7 to Year 12

- “Emotional support (education on mental health, drug and alcohol).”*
- “Sexual education (gay relationships) there’s nothing on them at school.”*
- “Time managing help.”*
- “More realistic lessons to help in the future.”*
- “To learn things that will help us in life out of school (e.g. bills, buying cars/house, loan).”*
- “Focus on the ‘real’ world – teach kids to do taxes, mortgage houses – prepare for living on your own.”*
- “Every school provide ‘Keys For Life’ program – teaching kids to drive.”*

Creativity and imagination in curriculum content

Time within the curriculum to be imaginative and to be creative was valued by students across Year 3 to Year 12. Creative outlets increased their intrinsic motivation, provided an avenue to express their feelings and provided ownership in the learning process, thereby facilitating both emotional and cognitive engagement. Student comments regarding creativity and imagination largely related to the arts, rather than across curriculum areas. Creativity and imagination are noted as enhancing key skills such as problem-solving skills, innovation, purposeful risk-taking, critical thinking, responding positively to failure and resilience.¹⁰⁹ Increasingly, these types of skills are viewed as essential 21st century skills.¹¹⁰

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“I like learning art because you spill out your creativity.”</i></p> <p><i>“Writing because I really like expressing my feelings through words.”</i></p> <p><i>“Writing – you can put your imagination into it.”</i></p> <p><i>“I love art because it lets our imagination run wild! (P.S it’s my favourite subject!).”</i></p> <p><i>“We love to read and get an imagination going.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Art and craft – I like it because I can be as creative as possible and it is sometimes very interesting.”</i></p> <p><i>“Short stories because you create another world.”</i></p> <p><i>“Art because we get to draw weird animals.”</i></p> <p><i>“More creativity.”</i></p>

Choice in curriculum content

Similar to expressing a desire for autonomy within learning experiences, students valued having a say in what they were learning about and to exercise choice in subject selection. Some students in Year 7 to Year 12 felt that their choice was constrained by the offerings or timetabling of curriculum content areas, which influenced student behaviour and enjoyment of school.

Year 3 to Year 6 students suggested changes for their school. Some students suggested the structure of primary school should replicate that of high school, whereby students selected subjects to study, whereas others wanted variety of choice.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p>If there was one thing you could change about your school what would that be?</p> <p><i>“Kids should choose the subjects at school from Year 3 and up.”</i></p> <p><i>“I would like to have two different languages, French and Italian.”</i></p> <p><i>“You can choose a sport to play and make different sport teams because people like different sports.”</i></p> <p><i>“Something I would change is the classes because I think there should be more items like in high schools because if you think of it my way people learn more in high school because of the items.”</i></p>	<p>What helps other kids like learning at school?</p> <p><i>“Interesting info or a class vote over what to learn ‘within the curriculum’.”</i></p> <p><i>“Having more say in what we learn and what subjects we would like to do (more variety of what we can choose).”</i></p> <p><i>“Having more courses open – ends bullying i.e. student wants to do certain course but as is not available takes it out on others.”</i></p> <p>If there was one thing you could change about your school what would that be?</p> <p><i>“Being allowed to select similar related subjects e.g. health studies runs at the same time as human biology BUT BOTH subjects are pre-reqs for any given health work field.”</i></p> <p><i>“Not make religion a compulsory subject – I don’t want to have to decide on important subjects because religion is in the way – at the very least they could expand the amount of religions we learn about.”</i></p> <p><i>“I would let students choose their own preferred subjects they think would help them in the future instead of doing every single boring subject.”</i></p>

Suggestions from students

“Ways to improve school and learning:

- *more subject choices*
- *later school starts*
- *start learning pathways earlier (Year 9) so you can focus on stuff that is useful to future career.” (Year 7 to Year 12)*

Students’ suggestions for change mirrored those about curriculum content they found enjoyable. That is, suggestions were to make curriculum content and learning meaningful and include choice – and these comments are reflected throughout this chapter.

With reference to curriculum content and learning that was meaningful, students referred to connection to their present and future lives. For students this meant connection to family or community, health and wellbeing, life skills and future careers, and opportunities to explore a variety of post-school pathways and careers.

Students in Year 7 to Year 12 also suggested that students in primary school should have education about drugs to inform them and prevent risk-taking behaviour. Some were concerned about the shift of Year 7 students to high school and the influence that older students may have on younger students.

4.5 Choices and a say on decisions that affect us

Including children and young people in decision making processes benefits the individual, organisations and the community.¹¹¹ Whilst formal schooling is structured by daily routines, school settings and the interactions that occur within also provide a range of opportunities for meaningful participation. Participation builds student's social and democratic skills, self-esteem, relationships with others, and contributes positively to school culture and student safety.^{112 113 114}

Survey findings

One-half of Year 7 to Year 12 students (51.0%) agreed with the statement that students at their school have a say in how things work. One in five students (20.9%) disagreed with this.

Female students were the group most likely to agree with this statement (53.2%) while Aboriginal students were the group most likely to disagree (29.5%).

Table 4.11: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students agreeing, disagreeing or neither with statement 'Students in this school have a say in how things work', by selected characteristics

	Male	Female	Metropolitan	Regional	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	All
Strongly agree or agree	48.8	53.2	49.5	51.7	51.3	45.5	51.0
Neither agree nor disagree	29.1	27.0	30.8	26.9	28.3	25.0	28.1
Disagree or strongly disagree	22.1	19.8	19.7	21.4	20.4	29.5	20.9

Narrative responses in the survey indicate that students strongly welcomed and appreciated opportunities to have a say and give their input to a range of matters affecting their school and learning.

Many students who said that they don't like school or feel like they don't belong gave reasons such as not being listened to, not being consulted or not being given the opportunity to effect change:

"I don't feel I'm being listened to."

"I feel not a part of the school because we are never consulted about changes up until the very last second."

"I have no impact towards the school [...]."

The survey for Year 3 to Year 6 students did not include any specific questions about whether students are given a say at their school in matters that affect them.