

The high school experience: What students say

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Increasingly it is recognised that high school students' views about learning and school experiences are important considerations in education. Students' insights are important as a basis for their active and productive involvement, and where there is a serious intention to improve students' learning. This paper reports on the learning and school experiences of fourteen Year 11 students at a high school in Perth, Western Australia. The students completed a survey and took part in small focus group discussions that sought to elicit their views, opinions and insights regarding their own learning and school experiences. Analysis of the data points to several factors that were seen influential in students' learning and school experiences, including: students' diverse needs, student voice, relationships, responsibility and control, and teacher qualities. The study reinforced the idea that students do hold well-articulated views about their own learning and school experience and when given the opportunity, they can and do express their insights and opinions clearly.

Introduction

If schools are taking seriously the challenge of improving teaching and learning then the students' experiences of schools and classrooms and their views about them should be important considerations. These views, opinions and insights, however, are rarely sought directly from the students themselves. This study aimed to do exactly that – provide high school students with a voice in an effort to bring to light what it is they want, need, like and dislike about the learning and school experiences they are involved in now, and will be in the future. Fourteen Year 11 students, all completing their Tertiary Entrance Examinations at a government school in the Perth metropolitan area, participated in the study. The study used a qualitative, interpretive approach, to explore students' perceptions as unveiled through two stages, a survey followed by small focus group discussions. There was only a period of two weeks between the completion of the survey by the students and the focus group discussions. This time was used by the researcher to analyse the survey data to uncover emergent themes and allowed the students' time to reflect on the survey questions and the thoughts it generated. It was a short enough period of time so that issues remained prominent in the students' minds.

Background

Young people within society are capable of holding well-articulated views regarding all aspects of their life, including learning and school. Students' views offer accurate insights into what they want and what they need in terms of learning and schooling (Ainley, 1995). Students' perceptions of school, learning, teaching and the factors that they consider affect each of these are of importance if we are to ensure all students are engaged, active and confident in their learning and school experiences (Ainley, 2004; Fullarton, 2002; Martin, 2003; Romanowski, 2004). This study took place in a Western

Australian high school with students in their second-last year of schooling. By this time in their schooling students had experienced several different schools, nevertheless their comments were predominantly related to their current school.

Importance of high school students' voice

The world in which young people live today is noticeably different from the one in which their parents grew up (Hiebert, 2002). Hiebert suggests that we, as a society, are only beginning to identify and understand the nature of this change. Listening to the needs and wants of young people enables society to provide appropriate 'tools' that are necessary for them to survive and succeed. Today schools are shifting from their sole objective of transfer and absorption of knowledge and academic achievement to also include a more inclusive focus on the development of the whole individual (Ainley, 1995; Jarvenoja & Jarvela, 2005; Patrikakou, 2004). Fullarton (2002) describes this as being a shift from a focus on what is learned to a focus on what it takes to develop the learner. Silins and Murray-Harvey (1998) also recognise the growing responsibility of schools to provide and encourage an array of experiences that enable the psychological, emotional, social and physical development of individuals.

The report, *Listening to Student Voices* (Education Evolution, 2005) highlights the 'traditional' education system's expectation of "students [having the] responsibility to adapt" (p. 2) to the system, a 'one size fits all' approach to education. The report goes on to acknowledge how the "traditional environments could have adapted to better serve these potential top achievers" (p. 2), by providing a system that exhibits flexibility and adaptability to individual needs. The changing face of schooling, from a system of teacher-centred teaching to a practice of student-centred learning has shown that the age-old adage of 'adults know best', simply no longer applies nor is it effective (Barry & King, 1998; Education Evolution, 2005). This change has also forced those adults in decision-making positions to concede that the 'blind-eye' approach to listening and incorporating the views of students is no longer acceptable (MacBeath, 2001a).

Traditionally, students' opinions and views have been under-represented and overlooked when it comes to discussing what students want and need in terms of learning and school experiences (Roberts & Kay, 1997). Johnson ((1991) in Shaughnessy, 2001b) states, "the only group whose voice seems strangely absent in this chorus of ideas and counter ideas is that of the students themselves" (p. 11). Fullan ((1991) in MacBeath, 2001b) poses the question, "What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?" (p. 11). It is this question, and the many more questions it evokes, that has seen the student voice grow louder and more powerful in recent times (Education Evolution, 2005; MacBeath, 2001b). Students have demonstrated in many cases that they have the confidence to take hold of the reins of their learning and school experiences and steer in the direction of empowerment, engagement and success (Osborne & Ireland, 2000; Shaughnessy, 2001b, 2001c). Roberts and Kay (1997) identify that students' views have the potential to "provide new or deeper insights that present challenges and opportunities for the adults who are most directly responsible for what happens" (p. 1).

Listening to, and incorporating students' views, is not only about acknowledging and preserving the active role of students in their learning and school experiences. Shaughnessy (2001c) promotes the idea that schools, teachers, parents and administrators, who are all adults, could learn a great deal from the views of students, stating that "students have much to say and to offer about changes that must be instituted so our high schools can" (p. 7). MacBeath (2001b) and Shaughnessy (2001b) identify several areas where adults can learn from listening to students' opinions and input, including classroom management, learning and teaching, and school as a social and learning space. Shaughnessy goes on to point out that "these are areas that teachers traditionally address and where students rarely have input, but they do have a distinctive vantage point as learners."

High school students' perceptions of learning and school experiences

No matter the extent to which individual school students find learning and schooling enjoyable, rewarding or purposeful, they demonstrate clear perceptions regarding the factors that support or hinder their learning and school experiences (Postlethwaite & Haggarty, 2002). The effects that students' perceptions have on the outcomes of education are subtle and palpable, yet inevitable. Saul (2005) points out that it is students alone who can accurately discern what helps them to learn and what does not. It is only through listening to students' views that the most beneficial and enjoyable teaching and learning strategies will be unveiled.

Students hold favourable views toward learning and school when they are participants in activities and experiences that are meaningful and interesting, and which provide opportunities to succeed both academically and developmentally. There is strong agreement amongst students that repetitive class work and work that requires minimal thought is disengaging and unmotivating. Students express the need for flexibility within the classroom (Ainley, 1986, as cited in Ainley, 1995; Ainley, 2004; Shaughnessy, 2001b; Osborne & Ireland, 2000; Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1998; Strong, Silver & Robinson, 1995). Variety in learning activities heightens student motivation and enthusiasm for learning and participation (Osborne & Ireland, 2000; Shaughnessy, 2001b, 2001c). The general consensus amongst students is that diversity of teaching, learning and school experiences positively affects their views about learning and the overall school experience (Batten, Withers, Thomas, & McCurry, 1991a, 1991b; Postlethwaite & Haggarty, 2002).

The extent to which students are responsible or the degree to which they share responsibility for their learning and school experiences, influences how they perceive learning and school. Roberts and Kay (1997) point out that "students are not clear about their own responsibilities for learning" (p. 4). Accepting greater responsibility for their learning motivates students to succeed and to participate actively in their learning and school experiences (Education Evolution, 2005; Osborne & Ireland, 2000; Shaughnessy, 2001a, 2001c).

Teachers are among the greatest influences in a young person's life. The effects teachers have on that person are carried right through to adulthood (Barry & King,

1998). Roberts and Kay (1997) comment “students make highly consistent judgements about the quality of teachers’ teaching” (p. 3). Students continue to identify teacher characteristics that they view as being significant such as subject area knowledge, enthusiasm, approachability, consistency and fairness, being respectful, acknowledging both good and bad behaviour, and making learning applicable to ‘real life’ (Betts, Zau, & Rice, 2003; Postlethwaite & Haggarty, 2002; Roberts & Kay, 1997). Roberts and Kay suggest that teachers and schools need to become more consistent in their approach to increase student comfort, confidence and success.

Students perceive relationships with teachers and parents to be important aspects of their learning and school experiences. Students desire positive relationships with teachers and value individual attention they receive from teachers (Education Evolution, 2005; Osborne & Ireland, 2000; Saul 2005). The nature and extent of such relationships differs among students but all students perceive student-teacher relationships as being an influential factor affecting their views of learning and school (Batten et al., 1991b). Parental involvement is a positive and significant force in a young person’s life. This involvement remains an essential source of guidance, support and encouragement for the developing individual during high school and well into adulthood (Patrikakou, 2004). Patrikakou suggests that expectations are the greatest influence a parent can portray to their child, and that these expectations should be high, yet attainable.

Often students state that the main interests of teachers and school administrators are maintaining order and controlling behaviour, rather than allowing students to express their views about their education. Roberts and Kay (1997) state that “Students experience schools as places defined primarily by the search for order and the effort to control students” (p. 2). Education Evolution (2005) suggests that teachers and administrators feel the need to be in control as they are “fearful of students’ answers to questions about ... whether the school was fulfilling the students’ needs as a learner” (p. 8). To overcome this ‘fear’ and ‘dismissal’, MacBeath (2001b) suggests that “students, together with teachers, and parents can play a much more active, participative, reciprocal role” (p. 13), in the development and enforcement of policy, rules and classroom conditions.

Students’ perceptions related to their learning and school experiences are as valid and important as those of other members of the school community, such as teachers, parents and administrators. Australian society demands great things from our schools, including maximum academic achievement and the development of our youth as confident and resourceful members of society. Students’ perceptions of learning and school and the factors that influence such views are continuously evolving. The most effective means for attaining reliable and valuable information about students’ views and the factors that influence these views is to ask the students themselves. Inviting students to express their views about learning and school and the factors they perceive as contributing positively and negatively toward their learning and school experiences assures a more comprehensive description of school effectiveness and learning.

The study

Methodology

The underlying aim of the study was to provide a space for students to voice their views and to uncover and document how students perceive their learning and school experiences. The methodology chosen attempted to 'get inside the heads' of a group of Western Australian school students and to hear directly from them how they view learning and schooling. The study was centred on a qualitative approach, enabling deep exploration of the high school student participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2002). The study was interpretive in nature with a focus on the observation, exploration and interpretation of the students' perceptions concerning learning and school. We sought to explore the views of students through discussion and then to interpret these views to enhance understanding.

The study participants were fourteen Year 11 students, both male and female, studying an academic program at a government high school in the southern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. The sample to be involved in the study was selected by 'convenience sampling' (Cresswell, 2002), a non-probability sampling technique. While the sample size was small and the range of students limited the study provided a rich and interesting set of views and raised worthwhile issues for consideration.

The research study consisted of two stages of data collection, a survey followed by focus group discussions with two groups of Year 11 students in one school. A researcher from outside the school administered the survey with 25 items where students responded on a five-point scale, strongly agree to strongly disagree. The researcher also conducted the focus group discussions.

The focus group discussions were recorded and data were transcribed for later analysis. The researcher also made personal notes immediately on completion of the focus group discussions. Creswell (2002) identifies that the use of focus groups enables the researcher to "collect shared understanding from several individuals as well as to get views from specific people" (p. 215). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggest that when researching young people focus groups are very useful because "some young people need company to be emboldened to talk, and some topics are better discussed by a small group of people who know each other" (p. 63). Roberts and Kay (n.d.) agree, stating that the intimate size of focus groups suits those students who may be more reserved or less willing to speak in front of their peers and the size also ensures that a sufficient range of views and responses is acquired to ensure the trustworthiness of results. The topics for discussion were deliberately dependent on the students' responses to the survey. Holloway and Todres (2003) describe the need for a certain degree of flexibility when conducting research and the need to find a methodological approach that is beneficial to all stages of the study. They argue for "appropriateness rather than method for method's sake" (p. 346).

Findings

Questions and topics for the focus group discussions were generated from the findings of the survey, which was conducted prior to the focus group discussions. The survey also served the purpose of ‘warming up’ the students to the topics and helping them articulate their ideas during the focus group discussions. The survey findings are shown in Table 1.

These survey results, which largely demonstrate positive views and feelings about the school experience, were used as the basis for two focus group discussions held soon afterwards.

Table 1: Survey findings

	SA	A	D	SD
1. My prior school and learning experiences have been positive (before Yr 11).	2	8	3	1
2. I do know how I learn best.	4	8	2	0
3. I do have opportunities in class to learn the way that is best for me.	0	14	0	0
4. I feel confident to ask questions in class.	4	8	2	0
5. I participate in the decision-making process within the classroom.	3	8	2	1
6. I have a clear understanding of my role as a learner.	2	12	0	0
7. I participate in the decision-making process outside of the classroom.	3	8	3	0
8. I feel I am in control of my learning in class.	4	10	0	0
9. My personal interests have been incorporated into the curriculum.	3	7	4	0
10. I have opportunities to contribute to classroom management.	2	11	1	0
11. I feel my views and opinions about my learning have been taken into account.	2	10	1	1
12. The learning experiences I am involved in are varied.	4	9	1	0
13. I feel my teachers respect me as an individual.	3	11	0	0
14. I feel the learning experiences I encounter at school are relevant to ‘real life’.	7	6	1	0
15. I show respect to my teachers.	8	6	0	0
16. I believe the skills and knowledge I have developed at school will be helpful to me outside of school.	9	5	0	0
17. I am encouraged by teachers to express my thoughts about schoolwork.	4	9	0	1
18. I believe my teachers want me to succeed as a learner.	6	8	0	0
19. My school has a positive atmosphere.	6	8	0	0
20. I do have positive relationships with my teachers.	4	10	0	0
21. Positive relationships with teachers and administrative staff are important to my learning experiences.	4	8	2	0
22. The learning experiences I am involved in are challenging yet achievable.	3	11	0	0
23. I am able to complete tasks at my own pace.	2	10	2	0
24. I have a clear understanding of what I need to achieve in order to succeed in Yr 11.	5	8	1	0
25. My expectations of Yr 11 and TEE are positive.	5	8	1	0

The main form of data collection was the two focus group discussions between a researcher and the student participants. One group consisted of five females and three males; the second group had four females and two males. Ages of the students ranged from 15 to 17 years. The discussion topics were developed from the survey responses. Topics for the focus group discussions are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Questions and discussion points for focus group discussions

Topics	Points to stimulate discussion
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tell me about school up until Year 11 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Control and management ▪ Learning • School in Year 11 ▪ What in-class activities did you/do you enjoy most? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Written work? Hands on? Experiments? ▪ Is this how you learn best? Do things click for you this way? ▪ Least enjoy? Least learning? ▪ Did you/do you do much work outside the classroom? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Camps? Excursions? ▪ Would you like to have done more/less? Why?
Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do you feel you are actively involved in the classroom and activities? ▪ Are you supported to do so? Are you encouraged to do so? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teachers? Peers? ▪ Do you get the chance to say what you enjoy and do not enjoy? ▪ Are you involved in decision-making? Rules? Activities? Topic ▪ Would you like the opportunity to be involved (more)? ▪ What way would be most comfortable for you? ▪ Suggestion box? Teacher-student discussion?
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tell me about your teachers. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Positive/negative relationships? ▪ Respect them? ▪ Do they respect you? ▪ Are they open to your suggestions/comments/interests/ideas?
Real life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do you feel the learning experiences you are involved in are relevant to 'real life' and life beyond high school? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why/why not? ▪ Would you like them to relate more to your future goals?
Importance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How important do you think your views are in relation to other people? ▪ Are you listened to? Dismissed? ▪ Teachers? Peers? Administration? Community? Parents?

The main data for analysis consisted of the comments during the focus group discussions. Five themes emerged from the focus group discussions: meeting students' needs, student voice, teacher qualities, relationships, and responsibility and control. These emergent themes and sub-themes are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Emergent themes and sub-themes from the focus group discussions

Theme	Sub-theme
Meeting students' needs	Student interests Learning activities Relevance to 'real life'
Student voice	Student involvement Opportunity to have a voice Being heard
Teacher qualities	Personal characteristics Attitude toward students Teaching style
Relationships	Student-teacher relationship Student-parent relationship Peers
Responsibility and control	Approach to learning Prospects Control and order

Discussion of themes

Meeting students' needs

Meeting students' needs was a theme regarding the learning and school experiences of the students that arose during the focus group discussions. The students expressed three main sub-themes, which were *the incorporation of student interests and needs into the curriculum and daily lessons*, *the importance of learning activities that are varied*, and *relating curriculum and classroom and school experiences to 'real life'*.

The students indicated that they preferred lessons and activities where their interests and needs had been incorporated, but commented that this rarely happened. During discussions, the students said that their teachers often seemed too busy or preoccupied to take the time to find out what interested the students and how these interests, as well as their individual needs, could be incorporated into the curriculum and daily lessons. They agreed that classes would be 'much easier', 'more fun' and 'more interesting' if students' interests and needs were taken into account and factored into teacher planning and programming. Dedicating 'one-on-one' time with students, and allocating 'extra lessons' to assist students with grasping more difficult concepts was one way that teachers could acknowledge and incorporate the individual interests and needs of

students. Overall, the students expressed a considered and pragmatic view with regard to incorporating the interests and needs of individuals, as highlighted by one student, Lila:

I think I would rather an open question where we can relate it to our interests, but relate it so that it is relevant to what we are learning ... I think there should be certain things where we are given an option and some things where we have to do what we are told.

The students revealed that they most enjoyed and found most beneficial being involved in a variety of learning activities. All participants agreed that they benefit greatly from a combination of bookwork, such as, textbook readings, worksheets and written activities, and practical work, such as, experiments and hands-on activities. Of doing only bookwork, Gillian stated, "every so often it is OK, but if you do it all the time it gets boring". Isabelle verified this opinion and went on to explain further the necessity for practical work, "I don't mind doing bookwork and notes, but then we're just writing it down, and half the time it doesn't sink in. So we need to do something to make us remember". Class discussions were an aspect of learning that the students identified as being both enjoyable and useful, commenting that discussions generate more interest, encourage student contributions and enhance learning. The lack of outside-of-classroom activities, such as field trips, was discussed. The participants noted that these activities were rare, but were not disappointed by the lack of such activities suggesting that cost, organisation and management were the determining factors.

The participating students commented that being involved in learning and school experiences that are useful outside of school and simulating a 'real life' environment were important to them. Relating subject matter to 'real life' enhanced their grasp of concepts and overall learning. They discussed positive learning experiences where teachers would clarify concepts with the use of 'real life' examples, which enabled students to visualise a 'real life' situation and in turn develop more concrete understandings. The students also identified the role and impact that relating subject matter to 'real life' had on their futures, beyond the classroom. Gillian made comparisons between the subject matter taught in classrooms and the domino-effect, commenting that "they all add up to the main thing [employment]" and what they do and learn now impacts directly on their future. Others agreed, highlighting that all subject matter does relate to 'real life' for that very reason. The authentic simulation by the school of a 'real life', 'beyond the classroom walls' was recognised and appreciated by the students. Jeannine argued that school was a reflection of the 'real working world', emphasising the role of assessment, deadlines, time management and dedication:

If you're going on a career, you're building up, you keep getting higher and promotions, you've got to meet deadlines, and they're pretty good with deadlines here. And you get free periods. And you can choose to go out outside the school building and play ping-pong and be here next year, repeating, or you can go in the library and study... I think the environment, they treat us like adults here... that helps a lot in giving us that little step into the real world so to speak.

The focus group discussions confirm that the incorporation of student interests into the curriculum and lesson activities and relating lessons to ‘real-life’ have an influence on students’ views about learning and the school experience.

Student voice

The second theme to emerge from the focus group discussions with regard to student learning and school experiences was *student voice*. Three main sub-themes regarding student voice and the effect this has on the learning and school experience were *the level of student involvement in the development of curriculum and classroom routine*, *the opportunities where students are allowed to have a voice*, and *the importance of being heard by teachers*.

Students stated that they would like to be involved in the decision-making within the classroom. However, they stated that they have minimal involvement when it comes to curriculum and classroom routines, commenting that these decisions were, disappointingly, solely the responsibility of the teacher. Students did express their desire to contribute to such components, particularly with regard to unit topics and texts to study. The consensus was that involvement in decision-making with regard to unit topics and study texts would make learning and school experiences more ‘fun’ and ‘interesting’. On the other hand, students commented that they were hesitant to become involved as, like teachers, they do not have the time.

The students indicated that the opportunity to have a voice was an aspect of their learning and school experiences that they appreciated and valued but it was often not made possible by teachers. The opportunity to ‘speak up’ depends on the teacher and the class, and students commented that they do have an opportunity to ‘speak up’ with certain teachers and not others. Isabelle stated, “we don’t get our say. What they say goes... it’s their way. We kind of go along with it. It’s their way, or the highway”. The students felt strongly about this issue and its effects on their learning and school experiences. The consensus was that students are most directly affected by any decisions made within the school or within the classroom and therefore should be consulted and allowed the opportunity to have ‘their say’.

The students raised the importance of being heard by teachers. They commented that their opinions were important and should be heard, yet they felt they were not actively listened to by the majority of teachers. It was agreed that while it depends on the teacher, the general consensus is that teachers are selective in what they want to hear from students. Lila noted, “I think they [teachers] pick and choose. I think they [teachers] kind of choose what they think sounds reasonable then they’ll [teachers] kind of play on it”. Several students did discuss certain teachers that do encourage communication with them. Jeannine described her English teacher:

No, the English teacher, Ms Wright, you give your opinion and then she gives her opinion. She doesn’t give the Council’s opinions. She will give her own opinion. She takes on everything. She does take on everyone’s opinions. I just think that’s really good.

The students emphasised the importance of the student voice. They indicated that they should be involved, that teachers should provide opportunities for them to have a voice and that teachers should listen so that they are really heard. Whether students are heard by their teachers depends on the individual teacher and situation.

Teacher qualities

Teacher qualities was the third theme that emerged from the focus group discussions, and three main sub-themes arose regarding teacher qualities and the effect these have on the learning and school experience of the students. These were *personal characteristics of an effective teacher*, *teacher attitude toward students*, and *the teaching style of effective teachers*.

The students described clearly the characteristics and personal traits that they viewed as being important attributes of an effective teacher. Passion and enthusiasm were characteristics identified by the students as important. Jeannine stated, "I like it when the teacher is really into it [lesson/topic]". Subject area knowledge - "someone who knows what they're talking about" - was a characteristic that Noel deemed imperative in their teachers and held in high regard. The students commented that an easy-going nature and a good sense of humour were also of importance to their learning and school experiences. Other teacher characteristics that the students expressed as influencing their learning and school experiences were honesty, confidence and trustworthiness. Students commented that not all of their teachers possessed the characteristics they perceive to be important aspects of an effective teacher.

The students commented that teacher attitude influenced their perceptions of their learning and school experiences. They agreed that teachers with a positive outlook and those who demonstrated respect toward students helped them to succeed in their learning and enjoy their school experiences. Mary commented, "if teachers don't feel positive about your learning, you don't really feel that engaged". The students described the impact a negative attitude and lack of mutual respect has on student learning and school experiences. Teachers who hold grudges toward particular students were identified as having a negative impact, Noel stating, "you shouldn't hold a grudge if someone does something".

The students discussed teaching style as influencing students' perceptions of learning and school experiences. They noted that teaching styles vary from teacher to teacher and they were able to identify the actions and teaching styles of teachers who they found influenced their learning and school experiences. They expressed their preference for teachers who progressed at a pace that mirrored the level at which students were capable of working. Several students indicated that teachers needed to utilise a teaching style that complemented the abilities of the students. Chris supported this preference, commenting that he appreciated teachers who "go out of their way, of their job, to do stuff for you ... even though they don't have to".

Students expressed clear views about personal characteristics of teachers preferring those who demonstrate passion, enthusiasm, honesty, trustworthiness, subject area

knowledge and a sense of humour. They showed that they are affected by the attitudes of teachers and prefer teachers who employ a teaching style that is appropriate to the abilities of the class and allows interactive learning.

Relationships

The fourth theme to emerge from the focus group discussions was *relationships*, with three main sub-themes of *the student-teacher relationship*, *the student-parent relationship*, and *the relationships with peers*.

The establishment of a student-teacher relationship centred on trust, encouragement, support and honesty was important to the students. They acknowledged the distinctive aura of trust that embodied the school. This aura of trust was appreciated and applauded, and was linked to the enhanced level of freedom the students in their last two years of school experienced on a daily basis. Students recognised that this trusting environment was the result of mutual respect between staff and students. Lila described how a mutual trust between teachers and students has been developed and established at the school:

And I think it also comes down to the teachers trusting the class. I know Mr Smith trusts us to, oh how do I say this? He will give us set work and he'll teach us and if we don't understand it he'll come to us and he'll work one on one. So, I think he puts a certain level of trust in us, so that he's there for us if we need him and he will give us that motivation to do it, but it's down to us to get it done.

The students discussed their feelings of not being supported or encouraged by their teachers and how teachers are quick to dismiss students, often resulting in the use of 'put downs' and derogatory name calling, following poor results. Several students recalled a time when they, or a fellow classmate, were told they were 'rubbish', told to drop a subject or told they were failing without advice regarding how they could succeed. The students' thoughts were encapsulated by Lila, stating, "it happens quite a bit here. If a student's not getting the grades, the teacher or the school tells you to drop it". The students explained that they understood where the teachers', often brutal, honesty was coming from but they would be more appreciative if the teachers were to dispense such honesty with input on how to improve. Isabelle commented that she wanted teachers to tell her "honestly how you're doing, but to look at the positive side and how you can improve".

The students indicated that a trusting, encouraging and supportive relationship with parents was important to their learning and school experiences. The students noted that their parents trusted them to make the right decisions and were happy with the decisions they made regarding their learning and school experiences. Jeannine summarised the group's thoughts stating, "I know whatever I do my mum and dad will be happy either way". Students also discussed the influence of parental expectations, explaining that their parents do have expectations of them and want them to do well. Gillian reasoned "they've dedicated their whole lives to you". The students acknowledged the support and encouragement that their parents expressed, and the

associated guilt the students felt when they perceived they had not responded well enough with high marks or academic success.

The students acknowledged the dual influence peers have in students' learning and school experiences. On one hand peers can be a distraction, whilst on the other peers can act as a network of support and encouragement. They commented on the role peers have in distracting students from their studies, describing how they were easily distracted by their peers during class time and study groups, and this resulted in much talking and laughter and little study. Some students noted the positive 'competition' that exists within their peer groups, describing this 'friendly competition' as "good, because then you can strive to do better".

Overall the students were very clear that they wanted encouragement, support and honesty from teachers, they valued strong relationships with parents and peers and acknowledged that their peers can sometimes be a distraction as well as motivating at other times.

Responsibility and control

The final theme of *responsibility and control* raised by the focus groups had three sub-themes of *the students' responsibility for their own learning*, *the importance of personal goals and future ambitions*, and *schools' priorities for maintaining control and order*.

The students expressed contrary outlooks with regard to who is responsible for student learning. Several students deflected responsibility onto their teachers, suggesting it is the teachers' responsibility to make sure they do well and learn. When discussing the students' recent poor exam marks, some were quick to shift the blame in the direction of their teacher, with Ben stating that "he doesn't really explain it well ... if we had a different teacher I reckon it would be cool". Others accepted and embraced the role they held in terms of learning and succeeding academically. Jeannine expressed her candid opinion regarding doing well:

If people don't pass, and they are blaming everyone but themselves, I think ... you obviously played a part. You've got the book. The answers are in the book. You look at the book. You know the answers.

Mary shared Jeannine's view stating, "if I fail then I'm just like 'I didn't put enough effort in' simple as that". Ken agreed, stating, "I blame myself". Jeannine noted that she is not solely driven to attain knowledge to pass a test or exam, but enjoys learning for its own sake:

I just like knowing things. I hate not knowing. Because if someone else knows something, I want to know it as well. I just like having the knowledge. I like people asking me something and I know the answer. Because I don't like going, 'umm I don't know the answer either.

Both of the focus groups discussed their prospects as influencing students' perceptions of their learning and school experiences. The two focus groups expressed differing opinions with regard to their futures. One group discussed the importance of achieving personal goals, both long-term and short-term, whilst the other group referred to being driven by 'money'. The first group discussed the drive to 'be something' as influencing students' perceptions of learning and school experiences. They mentioned that the accomplishment of their short-term and long-term goals was a major driving force behind their attendance and achievement at school. Lila described her short-term and long-term goals as "get through Year 11 and 12 ... hopefully get into Medicine". Regarding achieving those goals Lila added, "I know Mary and I are having a second try at Year 11, I know she is definitely motivated, and I do want to achieve my goals". Members of this group expressed their belief in themselves. Mary described herself as being highly motivated because, "I just really feel that I can be something really good". Jeannine also commented that she is driven to 'be something' and to achieve her goals. She stated, "I want to do well for myself, I want to be proud of myself".

The other focus group discussed money as influencing students' perceptions of learning and school experiences. They identified 'money' as being the main factor that drives them to do well at school and thus have an affect on their overall learning and school experiences. Gillian described the reasoning behind her endeavour to achieve higher marks, "to get rich, to make money when you are older". Ben concurred with Gillian stating that he "just wants money". These students perceived employment and, even more importantly, 'money' to be their ultimate goal. When the researcher commented, "it's not all about the money", the overwhelming response from this group was "yes it is". Alan noted that life after school and into the working world is all about the 'money'. During discussions with this group when it was suggested they were a long way from the working world, Alan was quick to interject stating, "what, three years? ... It's going to fly".

Both focus groups discussed their views regarding the school's motive of maintaining order and control of students. They expressed their perception that the priority of the school was to establish and maintain control and order, and to ensure that the school continued to 'look good'. The students were very vocal when discussing a ban on denim in schools and suggested it was another way in which the school can control the students. Edie stated, "you're going to feel more restricted ... more controlled". The students explained that by banning denim, the controlling arm of the school had a far greater reach because "everyone wears jeans". Participants identified the banning of denim as a form of punishment. Gillian said "they shouldn't make us get punished". Students made the comment that the school's motive for student academic success was the enhancement of the school's reputation, rather than students succeeding for themselves and their futures. Lila commented:

I think a lot of the times a lot of us feel they're out for themselves, like to just get them looking good... 'Cos if all the students are getting higher marks, hey the school has got a high average, the school looks good.

The students had strong views on responsibility and control, stating that they perceived the school's priority was establishing and maintaining order and enhancing the school's reputation rather than focussing on the students as learners. They showed they do have long-term as well as short-term goals but differed in their views of the balance of responsibility between staff and themselves.

Conclusions

The study illustrates that students have well-articulated views regarding their learning and school experiences. The complexity of the study and the topic became apparent throughout the research project. Descriptions of the differences in the findings from different data collection methods, between the two focus groups and between the participants themselves, while adding to the complexity also work to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. The survey findings indicated an overall positive outlook on learning and school experiences, but when issues were discussed in more detail and participants were provided with the opportunity to explore their views they were more critical and descriptive. These differences reflect the emergent nature of the study and descriptions of them enhance the credibility of the findings.

This study provided students with opportunities to express their views, opinions and insights regarding their learning and school experiences. The most significant conclusion drawn from the study is the understanding that students can, and do, hold well-articulated views about their learning and school experiences. When given the opportunity to voice their views, opinions and insights about their learning and schooling students did so with confidence and clarity. Students involved in this study discussed their learning and school experiences with a refreshing honesty and frankness.

The students pinpointed five aspects they perceived as influencing their learning and school experiences. These five aspects were: (1) meeting students' needs, (2) student voice, (3) teacher qualities, (4) relationships, and (5) responsibility and control. They commented that they most enjoyed and benefited from learning and school experiences that were varied and appropriately challenging and also incorporated students' interests and were relevant to 'real life'. They considered student involvement in learning and school experiences and having the opportunity to have a voice and to be heard by teachers, and other 'adults' to be important. They wanted a role as a partner in influencing their own experiences, and felt this was not often the case. The students considered teacher qualities, including personal characteristics, attitudes and teaching styles to be influential on their learning and school experiences. They indicated that trust, support and encouragement were fundamental aspects of their relationships with teachers, parents and peers, in addition to expectations from their parents and competition from their peers. Finally, the students indicated responsibility and control as factors that influenced their views regarding their learning and school experiences. The students approached learning in various ways and envisaged different prospects for their futures. They also illuminated the notion that schools should not focus solely on control and order, but rather on the development of the students' learning.

Acknowledgement

A previous version of this paper was presented at the AARE Conference, 2007, Fremantle, and was published in the *Proceedings* as Groves, R. & Welsh, B. (2007). High school students' views of learning and the school experience. In *Proceedings Australian Association for Research in Education Conference*.
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