Good Teachers / Bad Teachers: How Rural Adolescent Students' Views of Teachers Impact on Their School Experiences

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Abstract: Student views of their teachers and schooling can influence motivation and interest in schooling as well as their approach to learning. This paper describes the results of an investigation of rural adolescents' views of their schooling. A total of 240 students from government and non-government schools in the South West of Western Australia were interviewed in small groups. They offered a diversity of responses and insights related to their views of teachers and teaching. Results indicate that what these young people needed from their schools was enough flexibility and choice to cater for this diversity, not only in terms of curriculum, but in the methods of teaching, and the scope of future potentials made available for them. Students were able to offer a range of thoughtful, clear descriptions of what worked and did not work for them at school and what needed to happen to make school meaningful and relevant to their lives and needs.

Introduction

Understanding adolescence continues to exercise the energy of adults across a range of areas, from policy makers to politicians, parents to academics, teachers to psychologists, and musicians to magazine editors. Indeed, as Cohen and Ainley (2000) assert in their consideration of the state of youth studies in Britain:

> Young people have had to carry a peculiar burden of representation; everything they do, say, think, or feel, is scrutinised by an army of professional commentators for signs of the times. Over the last century, the 'condition of the youth question' has assumed increasing importance as being symptomatic of the health of the nation or the future of the race, the welfare of the family, or the state of civilisation as we know it. (p. xv)

The same could be said when we consider youth studies in Australia (Kelly, 2000, p. 83). Adolescence is big business and marketing to adolescents has become an art form in the wake of new forms of 'global multicultural capitalism; trading off cultural cross-overs, fusions, ethnic diversities and hybridities of every kind' (Cohen & Ainley, 2000, p. 240). This has led researchers to consider the impacts of consumer culture on young people in terms of self-identity formations and the construction of

various youth subcultures (Bessant, Watts, & Sercombe, 1998, p. 62; Cieslik & Pollock, 2002, p. 13).

Moreover while this stage of life remains one of great concern to adults, it is also of interest to adolescents themselves as they begin to negotiate a world that becomes larger and more complex as they move from primary school into secondary school and beyond. There is some agreement amongst historians that modern adolescence arose as an 'object' worthy of study in relationship to the advent of mass secondary schooling (Bessant et al., 1998; Campbell, 1995, p. 12).

This paper describes results of investigating rural adolescents' views of their schools and teachers. Student views of learning and school experiences, whilst important for educators, are rarely sought from the students themselves (Groves & Welsh, 2007). Many previous similar studies have involved university students, such as pre-service teachers. Whilst retrospective studies of perceptions of teachers and school experiences may provide worthwhile insights, accuracy of recall can be an issue. Conversely 'on the spot' interviews of young people may not take into consideration that some views may change with hindsight. It is important to remember that each child has a unique viewpoint, and therefore a diversity of perceptions of the same experience is expected.

Students' own views of their schooling are important as they impact on their lives (Krueger, 1997). Their views can also give teachers and teacher educators a better understanding of preferred teacher characteristics, teaching styles and schooling experiences. "Teacher behaviours have significant bearing on students' motivation, goal setting, selection of learning strategies or interest in the course" (Wang, Gibson & Slate, 2007, p3). Effects on students resulting from teacher behaviour can be positive or negative. "Students can blossom or wither because of the affects, behaviours, and methods of a particular teacher" (Wang et al, 2007, p17). In addition teacher behaviours can affect student motivation and interest in a subject or course and their approach to learning (Wang et al, 2007).

According to Whitfield (1976) students can link specific, observable teacher behaviours to student perceptions of that teacher. Students perceive the same teachers differently (Krueger, 1997) and individual perceptions can vary at different times, depending on current experiences. Groves and Welsh's (2007) mixed analytical study of eleven high school students' views of their school experiences concluded that students have well articulated views, offering frank, clear and confident responses.

Research on student perceptions of teachers has revealed a range of preferred teacher qualities. Effective teachers have been perceived to be "human", whilst also "professional", and "subject centred as well as student centred" (McCabe, 1995, p125). Results of a survey conducted by the US National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) in 1997 had secondary school students ranking their top three traits of effective teachers as: 1) a sense of humour; 2) interesting lessons and 3) having knowledge of their subject area.

A study of preservice teachers' perceptions of teacher effectiveness by Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher and James (2002) found seven emergent themes: student centred approaches, effective classroom and behaviour management, competence as an instructor, ethical, enthusiastic about their teaching, knowledgeable and professional. Characteristics such as knowledge, enthusiasm, approachability, consistency, fairness, respect of students and making learning relevant to their lives are consistently identified as important to students (Groves & Welsh, 2007). Positive relationships with teachers are also deemed crucial and influential to students' learning (Education Evolution, 2005). Whether similar perceptions are held by

adolescent students living in a rural region of Western Australia is, to date, unknown. Hence the focus of this paper is to explore this theme and in particular to address the question indicated by its title: How do rural adolescent students' views of teachers impact on their school experiences?

Participants

The target population for this study was high school students from rural areas of South Western Australia, and also those who had recently left South West high schools to commence further education and/or work. Their ages ranged from 12 to 18 years. Whilst attempts were made to select schools that represented the range that exists in the South West (for example, government, non-government, large and small), and to a large extent this was achieved, in the end it was a convenient sample relying on the willingness of school staffs to participate.

The participants were an opportunistic sample and to some extent self-selecting. Although nominated to participate by a contact teacher (usually on the basis of whatever classes were running on the day we visited), in practice it was only those who were willing to be interviewed and who were able to get their parental permission forms signed and returned to school in time, who participated. Because of this, it is not possible to claim that this sample (248 participants), was representative of the population of young people. Even so, the overwhelming consistency of responses to our questions indicated to us that our data were both valid and reliable.

Of course there remains a need for further research. For instance, it would be worthwhile exploring the questions with more Indigenous students. Examining differences according to age and gender may also prove a useful addition to this study. In addition it would be helpful to work with teachers, to share these findings and to collaborate with them in order to examine ways of meeting the needs that emerged from the data

Method

In this study the perceptions of rural young people living in the South West of Western Australia were investigated. Qualitative research methods were employed, in particular data collection and analysis approaches informed by a Grounded Theory approach (Straus & Corbin, 1998).

Data was collected by way of focus group interviews, undertaking these in schools, both large and small, government and independent, across the South West, with groups of young people studying a University Preparation Course, and with those outside the school system. Some of this latter group were young people who had left secondary school and were attending university and others who were still looking for what to do next with their time. In total, 240 students from eight government and non-government schools were interviewed. In addition eight young people who were no longer attending secondary school were interviewed.

Because of this procedure, and as noted already, the group who participated was a somewhat self-selecting group of participants: They needed to be willing and to be sufficiently organised to return permission forms to schools. Although this can lead to interviewing those who would normally be considered 'compliant', we did notice that a number of less than 'conforming' individuals participated (perhaps

because they had a friend who was doing so, because they saw it as an opportunity to "get out of work" or simply because it gave them an opportunity to give their perspective – and they were very honest when they did so). In our attempts to obtain representative data we also included groups of young people not in full-time education, training or employment, who were possibly considered 'at risk'. Overall, very few Indigenous students participated by way of the focus groups. To counter this, we used data made available by one of the researchers from a study she undertook in a school in which similar questions were put to a large group of Aboriginal students (Oliver, Brady & Savage, 2006).

By following a Grounded Theory approach, a method originally developed by Glaser and Strauss for use in the health services in the 1960s (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we could explore new and emerging issues progressively with each group. This was done in a cyclic way: as data emerged from one group we could test its veracity with another and build on this. Further, both in our data collection and later in our analysis, we were able to use a 'constant comparative method' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such we would consider, in a thematic way, the emerging issues and in an iterative fashion examine the main points until it was apparent that 'saturation' had occurred, i.e., "new data are not showing any new theoretical elements, but rather confirming what has already been found" (Punch, 1998, p.167). Although this is a highly interpretative approach, working in a team and with research assistants meant that we were able to compare our findings, not only those that emerged from within our participant groups, but between each other as researchers to ensure consistency.

Thus our findings can only properly be applied to the context from which they emerged, although inferences may be suggested for other contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2001) and so provide scaffolding for additional theorising, practice and research.

Findings and Discussion

As would be expected, a diversity of responses and insights resulted from this study. The participants described, often in detail, the impact that teachers and teaching had on their learning and their views on school life, about how much effort teachers expended, the impact of teaching, their perceptions about the qualities of good and poor teachers, and in turn, their views on pedagogical approaches. These responses are henceforth summarised within the themes of what makes a good school, the perceived impact of teaching, teacher expertise, personal qualities of good teachers, attributes that contribute to poor teaching, teaching practices, pedagogical approaches and teacher responses to bullying and racism.

What Makes a Good School?

Although this paper focuses primarily on teachers, we start here with a discussion that addresses the question 'what makes a good school?' The reason we start here is that the students in this study strongly equated the concept of a good school with good teachers. In other words, the school was personified so that the qualities of the staff were attributed to the quality of the school. As such the students' perceptions about their teachers strongly informed their perceptions about their school experiences. For example, positive claims were made about the atmosphere of 'good' schools, which were often described as 'friendly' and that had:
  Good teachers.

> *Good individual teachers.*
> *[We have] strong relationship with teachers.*
> *They [the teachers] know you.*

In contrast 'bad' schools were seen to be 'unfriendly' and had poor teachers. Overwhelmingly for students good schools were seen to be 'fun' and to be good because they were considered as places that 'take care of you' and provide 'opportunities'. As such if positive attributions were made about schools, for example 'it's a good school or 'I like school', generally there was also a positive claim made about the teachers in them who developed this atmosphere.

Conversely, when asked about the negative aspects of their school, participants also mentioned teachers in this context, describing in particular the lack of a 'range of teachers' and the problem that occurred when 'teachers teach outside their area'. For example:

> *Mrs B she doesn't know what we know and think we know what she says [and] she doesn't know what she's talking about – she asks someone else to bust us.*
> *Mr H, he swears, he's mean, he called Rhianna a bitch.*

This was especially the case with 'relief teachers' who were viewed in very negative ways by the many of the students. Furthermore some students indicated that schools would be better if they had 'more teachers that actually liked kids' and 'that it's not good for kids to know that the teachers are only there for the money'. At a smaller school one participant believed that you could get to know teachers too well and so 'some teachers don't shut up'. This was seen to be particularly problematic in small communities where 'everyone knows everyone'.

School principals, as the leader of the teaching staff, were described as 'good' and contributing in positive ways to the school when they were more 'than a decision maker' and when they were considered as someone 'who knows the real world', who cared for and knew their students. Comments such as these were given about the positive contributions of principals:

> *Knows lots of kids' names.*
> *You feel you can talk to him about things.*
> *He pops up [here and there around the school].*

On the other hand, negative attitudes were expressed about principals in terms of their distance from the everyday concerns of students, with some participants describing that they never saw him/her and didn't even know what s/he looked like. In one school students commented that the 'new principal was more like a politician (than) running the school'. Another aspect which participants commented on was what happened when there was a change of key staff. For example, students in one school described how a change of principal had resulted in the demise of previously positive aspects of their school, such as the removal of a common room for upper school students, banning 'muck up' day, and a change from 'vertical' home rooms, which had allowed students to interact with those from other year levels. This principal also did away with the 'presentation night'. Students were passionate about the impact this had on their perception of their school, saying that they felt upset that the principal had removed 'things important to us'.

Thus it is clear from the data that students made direct links between their perceptions about their schooling and the teachers (and principals) who worked in them. Their strength of feeling with regard to the staff was such that if the teachers were considered in a positive light, then the whole school was judge to be good. Sadly the opposite was also true, regardless of whether or not other good things were in place.

Impact of Teaching

Many participants described how the outcomes of courses/subjects were highly dependent on 'who teaches you', and that teachers 'make a huge difference'. Other comments by students on the impact of teachers were as follows:

Help make our dreams come true.

[Good teachers are] hell good.

[Teachers] inspire you.

One student described how 'in Year Eight I had good teachers and got good grades'. Many participants also described what happened when they did not get good teachers. If they did not have a good teacher they 'wouldn't try'. One student described how in Year Nine he had the 'worst teacher ever' in Maths and 'that had stuffed me up (for the rest of my Maths education)'. Poor teachers were described as 'gay', 'random' and 'psycho'. One student claimed: 'I hate all my teachers'.

Some older students recognised that if their teacher was not 'good', there was a need to get (outside) help such as tutoring. Students gave a plea for schools to 'employ good teachers'. (We examine what participants described as 'good teaching' in the next section.) Therefore it is clear that the quality of teaching has significant impact on the perceptions that students hold about their school experiences.

Teacher Expertise

It was clear that participants in the study considered good teachers to be those that 'know what they are talking about' and their information was 'up to date'. According to the participants the teachers should also be more experienced in their learning areas. Experience was of particular interest as it was mentioned several times: for instance, new teachers were often viewed as being less capable because of their inexperience. The importance of being able to explain things well was stressed by a number of the participants. In fact the participants pointed out that good teachers 'teach', whereas it seemed that poor teachers were not adequately trained for their subject area and so they 'take too long to address a simple question'; often 'speak in monotones', 'don't know what they are talking about' or sometimes 'reads from the text-book'. Finally students suggested that you can tell when teachers 'know what they are doing' but also when they 'can't explain things', and 'haven't been taught how'. Students, it seems, are astute judges regarding the capabilities and expertise of teachers.

Personal Qualities of Good Teachers

In terms of the actual personal qualities of teachers, the most often mentioned by participants as being praiseworthy was a 'good sense of humour' (e.g., when a teacher was able to be 'fun', and 'tell funny stories'). Participants particularly welcomed teachers who could have a joke and also 'take a joke'. Other qualities considered important were 'trustworthiness, a sense of safety and respect for students':

[Teachers who] trust you and everything like that.

Someone who is safe to be around and that we can talk to about anything.

Relaxed.

Other suggested positive qualities included being:
> *Passionate about what they do.*
> *Friendly.*
> *[Fair so as to] make things equal.*
> *[Teachers who are] treating people equally and who show respect.*

Participants also stressed the need for teachers to show respect by 'treat[ing] me like a person' and 'like an individual'. They described how good teachers 'won't make fun of you if you don't know the answer'; that they 'build relationships', and 'develop positive relationships with the students'. Good teachers can do this, according to the participants, because they can 'relate to you' and treat students 'not like a big pack'. Some respondents said that as they got older teachers treated you more like adults, but they also recognised that at times 'because we acted like kids we were treated like kids'. It was also noted that teachers who were friends with you outside school tended to be better in school. For example, one student described how his teacher was also his football coach, while other comments included:
> *I have a teacher as a friend from Primary School and she visited us in Year*
> *Seven and gave us presents.*
> *Mr H knows me – he knows my dad, I have a teacher as a friend.*

(As noted above, however, this familiarity could also been seen as having negative consequences).

According to the participants good teachers were also 'interactive' and 'more in touch' with their students and so consequently they 'know how far to go'. Participants were clear that this building of relationships could occur without teachers 'acting young', because they just needed to remember/understand what it was like to be young. Further, good teachers avoided humiliating their students and did not do things to embarrass young people, such as making the young person 'stand up to do things'. Good teachers 'not only care about you, but they care whether you do well or not' and so would 'go out of their way to help you'. In fact 'helping', as well as the attribute 'humour' were frequently used adjectives for good teachers. Overall, the consistency of the participants' responses in this area indicates quite clearly those traits that students of this age value and appreciate in their teachers and can be summarised as those who have a good sense of humour, who work to develop strong relationships with their students and who are caring and empathetic.

Attributes that Contribute to Poor Teaching

In contrast to those characteristics described above, poor teachers were described as not showing respect. They were also deemed to be inconsistent, untrustworthy and showed favouritism. A selection of the respondents' comments in this regard are included below. Describing the kinds of behaviour and attitudes that characterised poor teachers certainly exercised the participants' descriptive powers. They had a lot to say and many examples to share:
> *They [the teachers] say to respect them, but then they don't respect us.*
> *They tell us to shut up.*
> *They swear but they won't let you swear.*
> *[Teachers name] picks on me – swears at me.*
> *They don't listen and are deaf.*
> *Won't let us sit with our friends – we should be allowed to sit with our friends.*
> *Don't give you a chance to defend yourself (if you get in trouble).*
> *Get cranky.*

Grumpy old bag.
If you rock your chair he's mean.
One of them rang up my parents and lied to my parents which wasn't OK.

Some teachers, according to participants, 'scream', 'scare the crap out of us' and are 'weird'. There was criticism of those teachers who were not consistent and who 'growl a lot', 'make a fight [with you], '[are] constantly at you and are, therefore, 'annoying':

Ms [teachers name] is PMSing all the time.

In one school the students were vocal about the lack of trust they experienced from teachers, saying that they have to get 'your diary signed to go to the toilet!'

Quite a number of students commented on teachers who did not dress appropriately. This included dressing too young for their age, wearing low cut tops, wearing ugg boots and track pants (although the latter was seen as acceptable for the Physical Education staff). There were claims too, that poor teachers 'make up stories about you' and instead of being fair, show 'favouritism' and are 'biased'. In fact, one student was so concerned about favouritism, he suggested that student names should not be on submitted work. Another described how demoralising some teachers' treatment of students was, giving an example of practices such as giving back papers 'in order of worst to best results'.

Teachers who punished excessively for minor misdemeanours and who demonstrated poor 'self control' were singled out as being particularly problematic, not least because participants commented that these kinds of teachers will say things like 'I'm watching you', and they would 'go on and on' when you did something wrong. There was an interesting perspective expressed by a few in a Year 8 group – that bad teachers had a problem with themselves. One participant related a poignant story about a drama teacher who, after sending a student from the class following a minor altercation about footwear, then proceeded to mimic her to the class.

Generally the views about poor teaching were quite consistent and again demonstrated the considerable impact that teacher/student relationships, and also teacher behaviour, have on learner perceptions. There was some disagreement about the optimum age of teachers. Sometimes younger teachers were seen as good because they could relate to you and 'know where you are coming from', however older teachers were also described as good because of their experience and 'control'. However, some participants commented that there were older teachers in their schools who 'should have retired by now'. One student said 'He [the teacher] is ancient, even my mum said so, and he gets cranky'.

Teaching Practices

Leading on from the comments on the personal attributes of teachers was a discussion of what works in classrooms, specifically with regard to the practices of individual teachers. The main theme to emerge here is that good teachers were considered consistent and helpful. Moreover, good teachers were 'creative' and ones who 'mentally challenge' their students. Control of the classroom was of particular importance for participants mostly because they felt it was difficult to concentrate when other kids 'muck up and the teachers don't do anything about it'. One student called for 'more firm teachers' and, that there was a need for 'someone who will use consistent discipline without punishing the whole class for one person's behaviour'. Students commented that a good teacher was 'kind, understanding and at the same time, strict' and was 'someone who explains rules and explains their decisions around

punishment'. One participant suggested 'school isn't hard enough on bad kids', but conversely, another suggested that a good teacher 'lets us off for minor things'.

Students commented that 'you can tell when a teacher is having a bad day at home, someone will do something little and they'll overact'. Indeed with one older class group, we had a lengthy discussion about how sad it would be to spend your day at your workplace screaming at people, which was apparently a common occurrence in that school. Other students suggested that 'if a teacher is angry kids muck around more'. It was acknowledged that some groups would be hard to teach, and that Year Eight and Nine classes would be particularly difficult.

There were several implied criticisms about teachers who worked in a lock-step fashion without taking into consideration the individual abilities of students in a class: 'they expect you to keep up' and 'people who can, do it, they push them and we just drag behind'. These insightful reflections point to the need for teachers to individualise their teaching.

Participants indicated that good communication skills were particularly important to them. A frequently mentioned attribute of good teachers was that they 'listen'. Something as apparently simple as 'if you ask a question, they give you the answer' to students was especially noteworthy. Good teachers were ones who listened to the question, gave the answer and did not 'dribble on about different shit'. These teachers also did things like 'reward you for doing your work', did 'stuff we like', and made subjects 'interesting' and 'relevant'.

The emphasis on communication also came up with respect to teachers from non-English speaking backgrounds. There were several comments about the problems students experienced in understanding teachers who came from places such as Europe and Africa - 'we don't understand the teacher, he's French with an accent'. Another comment was: 'he needs to learn English better'. It is possible that these perceptions occurred because of rural students' lack of familiarity with people from a non-English speaking background. It does, however, point to the need for careful consideration when appointing staff to different to schools, particularly those in rural locations.

Finally, homework came in for some comment and here the criticism centred on the issue of setting too much unnecessary homework. Students also commented on the lack of flexibility when it came to the issue of homework. For example, some students were critical of teachers for not understanding problems relating to family issues, the demands of part-time work and that things could just crop up that prevented homework from being completed. Similarly 'keeping students busy' with 'random stuff' just for the sake of it was viewed very negatively.

The perceptions of the participants with regard to teaching practices were, in the main, mature and well considered. They certainly identified areas that can enhance, but also diminish good teaching. Once more it is very clear that the way teachers interact with students strongly influences how the participants perceive their schooling experience.

Pedagogical Approaches

The students had a number of suggestions to make about the pedagogy used by teachers, including aspects they viewed in positive ways, that they deemed beneficial for their learning, but also things they indicated did not work for many students. For example the participants praised teachers whose methods involved explanation, particularly with a focus on 'understanding' and with illustrations on 'how to'. Students viewed learning as not just 'to regurgitate', for instance:

I hate history because of the whole 'remember this date'.

Good teaching led to learning and this was achieved by understanding. Whilst Maths teachers came in for their share of criticism, one 'leaver' described how his Maths teacher had been really good because 'he taught us to do things the long way first so we understood it', in contrast to doing everything on a calculator without understanding. In fact, the overuse of calculators came in for quite some criticism. The need for understanding to underpin good teaching was also highlighted by the criticisms that poor teaching involved too much 'writing off the board' and when teachers 'talk too much'. Students criticised the convention of 'just sitting and reading a book', as though this is not an active past-time. In the context of the classroom, students were critical of approaches that saw them just reading and answering questions. Their comments included:

Read the book, answer the questions.

If everything is just out of a book, you don't learn anything.

Some students went as far as to suggest that 'teachers from high schools need to talk to primary school teachers' because as another suggested, 'I learnt more in primary school' and we did 'thinking skills' there, but we 'don't get to use any of it here'. Participants also felt that there was a lot of unnecessary repetition and suggested that teachers 'don't keep continuing on what we've learnt in primary school'. Clearly there is a need for much greater communication between teachers working at different levels of schooling.

Again the interaction style and 'relationship building' techniques of good teachings were viewed in positive ways. For instance, some participants described how good teachers 'take time – if someone was having trouble she would finish what she was doing and help them'. Participants suggested that good teaching involved making subjects 'interesting', with topics you could 'get involved in'. In particular students seemed to value teachers who made classes 'enjoyable' for everyone and 'not just the smart kids'. Clearly learning for students needed to be relevant - 'otherwise what's the point?' Participants suggested that teachers who 'draw on' the students' existing knowledge using approaches that were active and 'hands on' and that balanced general work with practical work, 'using group work' or 'getting out of school and doing things' such as going to the 'rec(reational) centre' were welcomed.

Other suggestions included that good teachers should let the students have more freedom, let them make their own mistakes in order to encourage learning, provide opportunities for autonomy, 'such as choosing which subjects to study' and that 'teachers should be more negotiable'. One 'leaver' did say, however, that in their opinion the problem is 'we've been entertained too much'.

Inconsistency was again highlighted as an attribute of poor teaching as was a lack of care about all students. Examples of this included a description that poor teachers just put time and effort 'into good kids' and that there was a lot of students who 'aren't that brainy but try hard, [but] teachers don't really care'. It was suggested that the school would just 'send you to a traineeship' (if you are not deemed to be sufficiently bright enough). Similarly others, in particular one Year Eight group, suggested that teachers needed to put more effort into the students who were struggling because:

It's not their fault they are struggling, but kids who are put into their classes, they just haven't learnt that well. Teachers seem to give up on them a bit too easy.

Others suggested that it was the students 'in the middle' that were overlooked. Thus it was clear that students perceived poor teachers as lacking the ability and/or inclination to cater for the needs and interest of all students.

Perceptions and Experiences of Racism from Teachers

While those interviewed in this study in general did not express concerns about overt racism, there were a few perceptions mentioned in this regard. At the same time, however, it should also be noted that indigenous students were under-represented in the current study. Most of the non-indigenous students had very little to say about racism and, with the exception of one community, were generally very positive about their Aboriginal peers and their families. The views of the indigenous students were less positive, particularly with regard to the teachers. For example, one student indicated that teachers 'treated you differently when they found out you were Aboriginal' and another Aboriginal student said it was a problem 'if you are Aboriginal but have light skin'. Some students felt that some teachers were patronizing. There was also a possible lack of awareness perceived of the teachers regarding the cultural sensitivity of these students. For example, one Aboriginal student claimed that 'the teachers expect us to call out for help but we are too embarrassed to do that'. These findings are supported by those included as part of another study (Oliver, Brady & Savage, 2006), where a group of Aboriginal students from the same region were interviewed. They indicated that they experienced racism at school sometimes, primarily from teachers, but adding that it was 'not too many'.

It was not just the teachers' interactions that drew comment: Aboriginal students also suggested that there was a lack of Aboriginal culture in the curriculum. Whilst the students' criticism was not directed specifically at the teachers in this regard, in reality it is teachers who select how the curriculum is covered. This is particularly true with respect to teaching resources. For example, in the English area, Aboriginal students expressed the perception that the texts pertaining to Indigenous issues tended to focus on previous generations and were not necessarily relevant to the current one. However, it is teachers who are responsible for selecting such resources and in this sense it is the teachers' responsibility. In addition, the policy and practices within schools were deemed to be implicitly racist. For example, some students felt strongly about the lack of Noongar language classes being offered (whereas other LOTEs such as French and Japanese were) and suggested that such classes would allow more interaction between each other and at the same time enhance the appreciation of their language and culture.

Finally, although many did not see racism against Indigenous students as an issue, it was very clear that as a group this cohort of students in the South West who had been interviewed for this study had less contact with other cultural groups, than did their city counterparts. It is perhaps because of this that they were quite intolerant of teachers from non-English speaking backgrounds, as discussed above. It was also apparent because of the participants' attitudes towards international tourists (see Oliver, Watts, Strikwerda- Brown, Hodgson & Palmer, 2007).

Teacher Responses to Bullying

It was evident in the interviews and from informal talks with teachers that bullying (both verbal and physical) existed in some form to a lesser or greater extent

at all the schools we visited. A number of participants described how it was the 'same at every school', and some confessed to being bullied themselves. Respondents had definite ideas about bullying and the lack of response from schools and, in particular, from teachers:

Schools should do more to help [the bullied].
They (teachers) don't deal with it in high school.
Teachers are aware but they don't do anything.
[Teachers] should listen more closely.

Having suggested that teachers should listen more closely to the students who were experiencing bullying, some other participants were quick to suggest that teachers should not 'resort to touchy feely' approaches to resolving bullying issues, although they did not elaborate on what such approaches might look like. Others described how 'people are too scared to tell' teachers.

It was apparent that a small number of the schools had active ways of dealing with bullying and other student issues, usually through referral to school counsellors. It was telling that when the students at such a school discussed the fact that there was a school counsellor at the school, one student expressed surprise despite being at the school for 18 months. Other strategies for helping that were mentioned included 'peer mediation', a program that, according to Year 10 students of that school, 'worked out well'.

Therefore, although bullying is often described as a school issue, the participants in this study generally conveyed the belief that teachers had a primary role to play in both preventing and overcoming its occurrence. At the most general level it was teachers who contributed a great deal to the atmosphere of a school. A happy, friendly school was one where less bullying was likely to occur, but as an earlier section indicated, these qualities were directly attributed to the teachers working within a school. According to the participants it was also the teachers who were instrumental in asserting control over student behaviour and it was their effectiveness, or otherwise, that prevented situations where bullying could occur. Similarly, teachers were seen as models for behaviours such as tolerance and acceptance of difference: Where this did not occur, the bullying was more likely. Clearly the perception of the participants was that teachers contributed in considerable ways to positive schooling experiences.

Conclusion

The students in this study were able to offer some very thoughtful and clear descriptions of what sorts of things worked for them at school, what did not work, and what needed to happen to make school meaningful and relevant to their lives and needs. The study's participants had diverse opinions, interests, abilities and aspirations. These were reflected, for example in the range of students' likes and dislikes about the curriculum, teachers and school life in general. The young people highly valued teachers who treated them well, looked after their social and emotional needs inasmuch as their educational needs, and related to them in ways that respected them as people. This included their need to have efforts affirmed, mistakes sensitively corrected, and to be related to in ways that did not harm their developing sense of self. Teachers who were good communicators were highly valued, with listening being one of the key elements.

Implications for teachers and teacher education include that:

- Students appreciate being given a voice and asked for their opinions. Strategies such as community circles, written communication and formal and informal questioning can enhance teacher understanding of the meaning students attach to their experiences and whether or not events are perceived as intended.
- The physical, social and emotional needs that young people depend upon in their families and communities are, in much the same way, expected from their schools and teachers. Therefore, it behoves educators and administrators to attend to building relationships with students through dialogue, respect for developing adult status and prudent use of power as a key component in good teaching (see for example, Pomeroy, 1999).
- Learning outcomes such as those within the Health & Physical Education and the Society & Environment Learning Areas (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 1998) can be promoted whilst addressing these needs. An example of a Social, Emotional and Physical Health (SEPH) framework that can be applied in educational settings is discussed by Strikwerda-Brown (2007).
- Young people seek an approach that can manage the fact that people learn at different rates, in different ways, and with differing views about the relevance or irrelevance of the subjects they are studying.
- By way of comparison, it is clear that what young people need from their school in this respect is enough flexibility and choice to cater for this diversity, not only in terms of curriculum, but in the methods of teaching, and the scope of future potentials made available for them. Educators need to be mindful that insensitivity to students' diverse needs in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and progression through their work are part of the conditions that lead to resistance, withdrawal, and early school leaving (see Smyth & Hattam, 2004).
- Young people need to be involved in decision making and want rules that are firm, fair and equally applied, while not being overly regulated, monitored and controlled (see Pomeroy, 1999).

Overall this study has reinforced the value of listening to student voices. It was obvious that many of the interviewed young people in this study appreciated being given a voice and asked for their opinions. The interviewers were often thanked 'for listening' at the end of the sessions, with comments including: 'I feel better that I've got that off my chest!' Giving students the opportunity to express, both formally and informally how they view aspects of their school, teachers and teaching can assist in developing strategies to enhance the school experience for adolescents and meet their individual needs. Comparing the views of rural adolescents with their city school peers would be worth investigating, although it is evident that views differ between schools as well as among individuals.

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