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Helen Egeberg
Edith Cowan University

Andrew McConney

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What do students believe about effective classroom management? A mixed-methods investigation in Western Australian high schools

Helen Egeberg¹  · Andrew McConney²

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Abstract Students' views about teaching, learning, and school experiences are important considerations in education. The purpose of this study was to examine students' perceptions of teachers who create and maintain safe and supportive learning environments. To achieve this, a survey was conducted with 360 students to capture students' views on their classroom experiences. Follow-up focus group discussions were used to further elaborate and clarify students' perceptions. Despite varying school contexts, students provided consistent reports that effective classroom managers meet students' needs by developing caring relationships and controlling the classroom environment while developing student responsibility and engaging students in their learning.

Keywords Classroom management · Teacher–student relationship · Student perceptions

Introduction

In this study, we sought to further our understanding of classroom management. From the perspective of *students*, we aimed to identify those things that teachers do that effectively facilitate teaching and learning in classrooms. Classroom management is universally seen as a key dimension of teachers' work; this is reflected in the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) standards that form the basis for national consistency in the accreditation of initial teacher

✉ Helen Egeberg
h.egeberg@ecu.edu.au

¹ Edith Cowan University, 2 Bradford Drive, Mt Lawley, WA 6050, Australia

² Murdoch University, 90 South Street, Murdoch, WA 6150, Australia

education (ITE) programs, the registration of teachers and their performance development. Teachers' skill in classroom management is also often cited as the dimension of teachers' work that most strongly influences early-career retention or attrition (Buchanan et al. 2013). We believe, therefore, that this research has an important contribution to make in improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools, as well as in informing the current re-examination of ITE in Australia (e.g., TEMAG 2014) and internationally (e.g., OECD 2014). We hold this view because our approach means that findings that potentially emerge are grounded in the realities of classroom life as experienced by those whom we seek to most influence, the students themselves.

Much research on effective teaching and classroom management has canvassed teachers' views and typically refers to teachers' knowledge and beliefs. In contrast, research on students' views often refers to perceptions (thoughts, beliefs and feelings) about persons, situations or events (Schunk and Meece 1992). In addition, students' thoughts, beliefs and feelings are often portrayed as overlapping and interchangeable. Young people, however, hold well-articulated views regarding effective and ineffective classroom management (Ainley 1995). The factors that students consider to affect this dimension of teaching are important if all students are to be engaged, active and confident in their learning and school experiences (Ainley 2004; Fullarton 2002; Martin 2003; Romanowski 2004). As the central participants in classroom interactions, both students and teachers have strong views about what it takes to effectively manage learning and behaviour. To ignore the thinking of either of these stakeholders would be to the detriment of teaching and teacher education (Woolfolk Hoy and Weinstein 2006).

The concept of *student voice* has also been reflected in various Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reports that stress the importance of a "school ethos focused on student needs, with the whole school team taking time to find out the needs and interests of students; with students listened to and their voice used to drive whole school improvement" (OECD 2006, p. 25). Recent work undertaken in the United States, and supported by the Gates Foundation Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) Project also noted that:

No one has a bigger stake in teaching effectiveness than students. Nor are there any better experts on how teaching is experienced by its intended beneficiaries. But only recently have many policymakers and practitioners come to recognize that - when asked the right questions, in the right ways - students can be an important source of information on the quality of teaching and the learning environment in individual classrooms. (MET Project 2012, p. 1)

Whilst the voice of young people is being increasingly sought in a number of areas, it has also been criticized and questioned as to its legitimacy and validity. "This is particularly so, over the issue of whether the focus of this work should be on supporting young people articulate their voice or directed at getting professionals to listen and respond" (Hadfield and Haw 2001, p. 485). The aim of this research is to do both—provide an outlet for students' collective voice to be amplified in the hope of further articulating this into practice.

Attending to *student voice* in school or teacher improvement is therefore about valuing the learning that results when we engage the capacities and voices of young people in schools (Jackson 2005). In this study, we have focused on hearing student voices about teaching and learning. In particular, we sought to understand students' views about teachers who create and maintain safe and supportive learning environments, and the frequency, efficacy and acceptability of various disciplinary interventions.

Students' perceptions of effective classroom management

Research shows that students are not passive recipients of teacher actions. Students choose to resist or comply and make decisions to ignore, avoid, sabotage or question teachers' requests. Students' actions are purposeful based on their interpretations of classroom life and their relationships with teachers (Schlosser 1992; Sheets 2002; Sheets and Gay 1996). Because of this and because students' decisions about whether to behave and cooperate are often based on their respect for the teacher, Woolfolk Hoy and Weinstein (2006) focused on students' perceptions of "good teachers" (p. 183) from which three key factors emerged. Students believe that "good" teachers: (1) establish caring relationships with students; (2) exercise authority without being rigid, threatening or punitive; and (3) "make learning fun" (p. 187).

Care

In establishing caring relationships, studies continue to show the importance students place on teachers' willingness to "be there" for them, listen and show concern for students' personal and academic lives (Cothran and Ennis 2000; Cothran et al. 2003; Ferreira and Bosworth 2001; Garrett et al. 2009; Garza 2009; Garza et al. 2010). More positive behaviours in class were reported with teachers who developed caring, respectful relationships with students. Students distinguished between academic and personal caring and believed strongly that they need to feel cared for before they could care about school. Students frequently named teachers as caring or uncaring and these distinctions were central to their discussions on effective classroom management. Critical to teachers being perceived as caring was their ability to communicate and listen to students.

Authority

Students also distinguished between teachers who are 'strict' and those who are 'mean' (Weinstein 2003) and want teachers who are able to maintain order, provide limits for behaviour, and create a safe environment. In a study by Lewis et al. (2012) students from seven secondary schools in Northern Metropolitan Melbourne, who had been excluded from class for misbehaviour, completed questionnaires. The study reported that 58% of the students did not recall being given an explanation for

their exclusion, 29% reported that their teachers seemed calm, not angry and 70% of students noted no prior warnings or consequences. More than 45% of students felt rejected and that the teachers had been mean and uncaring which in turn reinforced their inclination to misbehave.

Similarly, when grade six to twelve physical education students were asked why they thought some teachers were not good managers, they offered two views (Cothran et al. 2003). First, some students thought teachers worried that by being strict, they would not be liked; second, students thought some teachers did not have the knowledge or confidence to manage a class. In informal interviews published elsewhere, students' desire for teachers to maintain order and provide limits for behaviour was expressed (Weinstein 2003): "teachers need to be a strong authority figure...teachers need to show strength...teachers need to come off as someone who has control" (pp. 25–26). Just as being too lax was a problem, so was being too strict. As one student in Cothran et al.'s (2003) study suggested "a lot of times if you have a stricter teacher you sometimes have more trouble because students will want to act up to make some fun if the teacher isn't fun" (p. 438).

Students felt more positive about their classes when teachers were seen as both "cooperative"—caring, helpful, friendly, and supportive and "dominant"—showing leadership, being influential, and acting in an authoritative manner (Brekelmans et al. 2002, p. 1). In other words, students indicate that they respect teachers who have rules but are not overly rigid, and set themselves "above and apart" (Davidson 1999, p. 360).

Fun

According to students, teachers should also "make learning fun" (Woolfolk Hoy and Weinstein 2006, p. 187). Studies show that students appreciate a teacher who has the ability to develop and implement engaging, varied lessons. In 1991, McIntyre completed a study with 308 "acting-out" students, ranging in age from five to 20, in self-contained classes in a large urban area. Students reported (via survey) that they behave better and work harder for teachers who teach well and show them respect. From the students' perspectives, engaging teachers are those who communicate, care and enthusiastically present active learning opportunities (Cothran and Ennis 2000). For students, communication involves teachers talking with them, listening and valuing their input. When students feel like the teacher cares about them and their learning they are more likely to engage. This is shown by teachers using interactive, participatory strategies structured to meet students' interests and needs. Students also have high praise for teachers who combine humour, enthusiasm and creativity in their lessons (Davidson 1999).

Disciplinary interventions

Students also have strong views on disciplinary interventions utilized by teachers. Lewis et al. (2008) administered a questionnaire on disciplinary strategies to more than 5000 students in Years 7–12 in Australia, Israel and China. Students were

asked to indicate the extent to which their teacher used interventions ranging from hints and nondirective descriptions of unacceptable behaviour to punishment and aggressive techniques. The questionnaire also asked students to report how they feel when their teacher responds to misbehaviour. The patterning of correlations evident in the data collected in different national settings was very similar and showed that both punishment and aggression have a strong association with negative affect towards the teacher, often associated with the intervention being perceived as unjust and causing further distraction. Hinting and the involvement of students in discussion and disciplinary actions were found to be associated with greater liking of the teacher and stronger belief that the intervention was necessary and therefore not distracting. An earlier study by Lewis (2001) suggested that teachers' use of relationship strategies such as recognitions, discussions, involvement and nondirective hints rather than coercive discipline (punishment and threats) promoted greater student responsibility. Interestingly, Lewis et al. (2005) further suggested that Chinese teachers appear less punitive and aggressive than do those in Israel or Australia and more inclusive and supportive of students' voices.

Discourse around excellence in teaching and improving learning outcomes for all students often includes political, school administration and teacher voices. Student voices, however, tend to be heard less but need to be part of the discourse as students are capable of identifying what teachers do and do not do well (Murphy et al. 2004). Hadfield and Haw suggest that voice "privileges experience, over theory or training, as the basis of an individual's understanding of an issue or activity, and the meaning they give to it" (Hadfield and Haw 2001, p. 485). It prefers subordinated 'voices' over dominant 'voices' and is often used with excluded or silenced youth. A key part of the discussions around 'voice' suggest examining and challenging the processes that silence these groups. Research on school dropouts for example has been predominantly concerned with identifying key characteristics of this cohort rather than with examining the experiences and perspectives of these students to challenge the notion that schools do not contribute to the decision or choices made (Stevenson and Ellsworth 1993). The same could be suggested around behaviour and therefore classroom management. Much has been concerned with identifying key characteristics of those students who are defiant or badly behaved and little actually examining the experiences and perceptions of these young people. Engaging in such research may in fact show that schools also contribute to the manifestation of these behaviours.

This research, therefore, gives voice to the views and experiences of students regarding effective classroom management with the intent of meaningfully contributing to the ongoing discourse around ITE and school improvement. One overarching question frames this research: what characteristics or descriptions do high school students ascribe to or associate with teachers they have identified as being effective classroom managers? Important component questions include: do students' characterizations of effective classroom managers differ according to student gender, school sector or socio-educational advantage (SEA)?

Method

Using *classroom management* as a conceptual umbrella, this research examines high school students' views on three inter-related aspects of teacher practice: classroom management (actions to create a productive, orderly learning environment), discipline (actions to elicit change in students' behaviour), and socialization (actions to help students fulfil their responsibilities) (Woolfolk Hoy and Weinstein 2006). Our overarching intention was to understand better what teachers do to create and sustain safe and supportive learning environments, *from the perspective of their students*.

We used a mixed methods sequential explanatory design, with two distinct phases: quantitative followed by qualitative (Creswell 2014), the later enabling broad and deep examination of student participants' perspectives. We started with a student survey to identify apparent differences among groups (e.g., girls vs boys, private schools vs public schools) and potentially anomalous results. We then followed up these results with an in-depth qualitative study, comprising student focus groups, to further shed light on why these results occurred.

The study is also interpretive in nature with a focus on the characterization and interpretation of students' perceptions concerning classroom management. Two key issues need to be contemplated before beginning any piece of research with young people; how the 'voice' of young people is used and the medium through which it is possible to articulate their 'voice'. Hadfield and Haw (2001) refer to three types of voices and the importance of knowing which type of voice young people will be giving to their experience in order to determine ways to amplify this voice. The three types are authoritative, critical and therapeutic. The voice that students have chosen to use in the context of their participation in this study was an authoritative one—a voice of those who have a shared common experience. Students described their views through surveys and focus group discussions. The authors, university teacher educators in Western Australia, summarized, analysed and interpreted these views to enhance our understanding and contribute to the research literature on effective teaching and classroom management.

To reflect potential variations across schools, we recruited student participants from a range of schools and backgrounds including higher and lower index of community socio-economic advantage (ICSEA) schools, private and public schools, and male and female students. Students were recruited from metropolitan high schools in Perth, Western Australia (WA), and in all comprised 360 Year 9 and 10 students (255 males and 105 females), ranging in age between 14 and 16 years. Each of the three school sectors—the Association of Independent Schools of WA (AISWA), the Department of Education (DOE) and the Catholic Education Office (CEO), was contacted for approval to conduct the study and ethics approval was granted before the first author approached the principals of over 30 schools to request their involvement.

After recruitment, one AISWA school, two CEO schools and seven DOE schools volunteered to participate. For the purpose of this research, we combined the AISWA and CEO schools into one group classified as "private" schools. To ensure

some parity in number of schools, we chose to use only three DOE (public) schools in the research and the number of participants at each school was determined by the school. Information sheets and consent forms were provided to parents to gain informed consent for obtaining data from students. Table 1 provides a breakdown of student participants by school characteristics and gender. Two of the schools used in the study were large schools for boys. Whilst this provided us with additional participants, it also brought about an imbalance in the numbers of boys from more privileged schools. When analysed, however, very little difference was found in the typical views of boys in comparison to their female peers, or in comparison to the participants as a whole. These checks supported our decision to include the boys despite the imbalance in gender distribution.

The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is a scale developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). The ICSEA uses information relating to parental occupation and education, and school characteristics such as location and the proportion of Indigenous students enrolled to provide a numerical scale reflecting socio-educational advantage. ICSEA values can range from around 500 (representing extreme educational disadvantaged) to about 1300 (representing schools with students with very advantaged backgrounds) (ACARA 2015). In Western Australia in the year these data were collected, the ICSEA values for Perth metropolitan secondary schools ranged from 896 to 1258. Whilst ICSEA values are calculated on a scale with an average of 1000, in the year this research was collated the average ICSEA value for Perth metropolitan secondary schools was 1056. In this study, the highest ICSEA value was close to 1180 and the lowest ICSEA was close to 900 with an average ICSEA value of 1092. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, schools with an ICSEA above 1070 were considered to have a more privileged level of socio-educational advantage (SEA), and those with values less than 1070 were considered to have a less privileged level of SEA.

Two instruments were used for data collection: the first was a survey that allowed students to characterize their views of what it is that teachers do in effectively managing their classrooms; the second, focus group interviews, allowed groups of students in each school to provide more depth to their perspectives of effective classroom management.

The survey used in the first phase was developed by the Tripod project at Harvard University, with the “tripod” built around content, pedagogy and relationships with

Table 1 Number of participants by school sector, gender and SEA

	Private		Public	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Higher SEA schools ($n = 3$; ICSEA values above 1070)	194	4	13	36
Lower SEA schools ($n = 3$; ICSEA values up to 1070)	7	15	41	50
Total	201	19	54	86

a range of key indicators of student engagement spanning emotional, motivational and behavioural engagement (Ferguson 2010). This “tripod” appealed as it was similar to that used in defining classroom management: classroom discipline, pedagogy and socialization. In this study, we used the Students Perceptions Survey (SPS) from Cambridge Education and Tripod Survey Assessments as it most closely aligned with these three elements. The SPS was previously used in the MET project as a tool for capturing students’ views on their classroom experiences. The survey assesses key dimensions of school life and teaching practice as students experience them and is grounded in theoretical and empirical work in education, psychology and in the study of organizations (Phillips and Rowley 2015). The central constructs used in the SPS come from the 7Cs framework for *effective teaching* (Tripod Project 2011), and include the following:

1. *Care* Show concern and commitment.
2. *Confer* Invite ideas and promote discussion.
3. *Captivate* Inspire curiosity and interest.
4. *Clarify* Cultivate understanding and overcome confusion.
5. *Consolidate* Integrate ideas and check for understanding.
6. *Challenge* Press for rigor and persistence.
7. *Control* Sustain order, respect and focus.

Socialization is further clarified within the categories of Care and Confer; pedagogy is understood within Captivate, Clarify and Consolidate; and discipline is elaborated within Challenge and Control. Tripod surveys, including SPS, require students to rate teachers using a 1–5 scale on various dimensions such as the extent to which teachers show care and consideration for their students, have high expectations, and explain material in ways to engage and ensure opportunities for student participation. In this study, students were asked to think about and respond to the survey items based on their experiences in a specific classroom, with an *effective teacher—one whom they believe creates and maintains safe and supportive learning environments*. The survey contained 35 observation-based statements allowing students to record their experiences on a five-point scale ranging from “totally true” to “totally untrue” and was completed electronically or on paper depending on what suited each school’s environment.

Stage two of data collection involved focus group interviews with students who had indicated on their survey that they were willing to participate. As this research provided evaluative commentaries on effective classroom management, we recognized that the impact of these could only be truly accessed by working with students, talking with them about their perspectives and giving due consideration to the legitimacy of their ‘voice’. This is particularly important when students’ collective ‘voice’ is only one amongst many others. The focus groups allowed elaboration and clarification about students’ perspectives on effective teaching and perceptions of the frequency, efficacy and acceptability of various disciplinary interventions. Each focus group involved four to six students and the composition of each, with regard to gender and age, depended on the availability and composition of students in the schools. Each focus group interview took place at the respective

school, at a time convenient to staff and students. Focus group interviews were semi-structured, audio taped for future transcription, and approximately 30 min in duration.

Findings

Stage 1: Survey

The SPS provided students a framework that allowed characterization of teachers they consider effective managers of learning and teaching. The survey results show all attributes identified in the 7Cs framework were important in students' perceptions about effective classroom teachers (Table 2). In examining the results, one behaviour showed a considerably lower proportion of students thinking it 'true' (mostly or totally) for effective teachers. Only 29% of students indicated that effective teachers *allow students to decide how activities are done in class* (item 28).

The survey was also used in determining if differences exist in students' views of effective teachers based on students' gender, school SEA and school sector. The decision to compare the groups according to the percentage who indicated that something was 'true' for them, and to provide group-wise comparisons this way rather than through inferential statistical techniques that would have highlighted statistical significance (or not) was deliberately taken to simply present a descriptive analysis before analysis of the qualitative data. The descriptive survey results highlight that there are few meaningful differences in perspectives between the different groups.

Because of the imbalance between the numbers of male and female students responding (54% private school males), it was important to first ascertain if any substantial differences exist between the responses of private school males and the views of the rest of the sample. Only four survey items showed a notable difference (greater than 10%) and all showed males from higher SEA private schools believing the item true to a lesser extent than all other students. These items shown in Fig. 1 were #28: *Students get to decide how activities are done in this class*; #24: *This teacher makes learning enjoyable*; #11: *If you don't understand something, this teacher explains it another way*; and, #2: *This teacher seems to know if something is bothering me*. For these four items, between 10 and 12% fewer male private school students (in comparison to all other groups) believed the item to be true of teachers they consider as effective classroom managers. Overall, however, this lack of substantial difference between private school male students and all other groups across the SPS's 35 items provided some reassurance that the gender imbalance in survey respondents would not have a large or misleading effect on planned group-wise comparisons.

Similarly, a comparison of responses from students in private schools against students in public schools is shown in Fig. 2. The largest difference between public and private school student responses was for item #6: *Behaviour in this class makes the teacher angry* with 18% of private school students believing this was true in

Table 2 Student Perception Survey responses ($n = 360$)

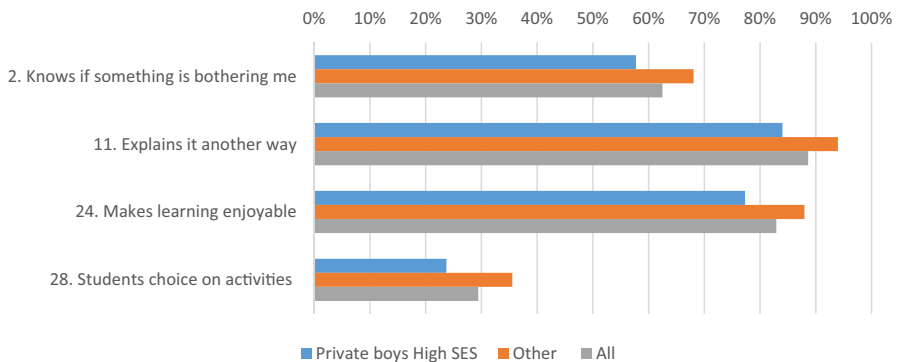
For this survey, we would like you to think about an effective teacher—one who you believe creates and maintains safe and supportive learning environments. For each statement please select the box that most appropriately describes your view of this classroom		Totally untrue (%)	Mostly untrue (%)	Somewhat true (%)	Mostly true (%)	Totally true (%)
Care	1. This teacher makes me feel s/he really cares about me	1	1	13	47	38
	2. This teacher seems to know if something is bothering me	2	8	28	45	18
	3. This teacher really tries to understand how students feel about things	1	4	20	46	28
Control	4. Student behaviour in this class is under control	1	1	16	47	35
	5. I hate the way that students behave in this class	38	47	11	3	0
	6. Student behaviour in this class makes the teacher angry	14	49	24	10	3
	7. Student behaviour in this class is a problem	38	47	9	5	1
	8. My classmates behave the way this teacher wants them to	1	6	23	55	15
	9. Students in this class treat the teacher with respect	1	2	12	48	38
	10. This class stays busy and doesn't waste time	1	4	25	48	22
Clarify	11. If you don't understand something, this teacher explains it another way	0	3	8	38	51
	12. This teacher knows when the class understands, and when we do not	1	3	18	46	33
	13. When s/he is teaching us, this teacher thinks we understand when we don't	24	53	14	6	3
	14. This teacher has several good ways to explain each topic that we cover in class	1	3	14	52	30
	15. This teacher explains difficult things clearly	1	2	9	48	41

Table 2 continued

For this survey, we would like you to think about an effective teacher—one who you believe creates and maintains safe and supportive learning environments. For each statement please select the box that most appropriately describes your view of this classroom		Totally untrue (%)	Mostly untrue (%)	Somewhat true (%)	Mostly true (%)	Totally true (%)
Challenge	16. This teacher asks questions to be sure we are following along when s/he is teaching	0	3	14	45	38
	17. This teacher asks students to explain more about the answers they give	0	4	23	51	23
	18. In this class, this teacher accepts nothing less than our full effort	0	3	18	46	34
	19. This teacher doesn't let people give up when the work gets hard	1	3	16	44	37
	20. This teacher wants me to explain my answers—why I think what I think	0	2	20	44	34
	21. In this class, we learn a lot almost every day	0	3	11	43	43
	22. In this class, we learn to correct our mistakes	0	2	14	45	40
Captivate	23. This class does not keep my attention—I get bored	39	40	12	7	3
	24. This teacher makes learning enjoyable	1	3	13	44	39
	25. This teacher makes lessons interesting	1	3	11	43	42
	26. I like the way we learn in this class	1	2	8	44	46
Confer	27. This teacher wants us to share our thoughts	1	6	20	39	34
	28. Students get to decide how activities are done in this class	8	28	34	21	8
	29. This teacher gives us time to explain our ideas	1	6	20	51	22
	30. Students speak up and share their ideas about class work	2	6	25	39	29
	31. This teacher respects my ideas and suggestions	0	3	9	37	51

Table 2 continued

For this survey, we would like you to think about an effective teacher—one who you believe creates and maintains safe and supportive learning environments. For each statement please select the box that most appropriately describes your view of this classroom		Totally untrue (%)	Mostly untrue (%)	Somewhat true (%)	Mostly true (%)	Totally true (%)
Consolidate	32. This teacher takes the time to summarize what we learn each day	3	8	26	37	26
	33. This teacher checks to make sure we understand what s/he is teaching us	1	3	9	48	39
	34. We get helpful comments to let us know what we did wrong on assignments	0	2	10	46	42
	35. The comments that I get on my work in this class help me understand how to improve	1	3	11	39	47

**Fig. 1** Percentages of survey responses marked as 'true' (mostly or totally) of private school males compared to the views of the rest of the sample that differed by more than 10%

comparison to only 6% of public school students. Only one other item showed a higher proportion of students at private schools believing it true: 14% of students at private schools suggested that *this class does not keep my attention—I get bored* (item #23) compared to 4% of responding students at public schools. Conversely, two items showed a higher proportion of students at public schools believing it true; 69% of students at public schools thought that effective classroom managers *know when something is bothering me* (item #2) in comparison to 59% at private schools; and 89% of students at public schools suggested that effective *teachers make learning enjoyable* (item #24) compared to 79% of students at private schools.

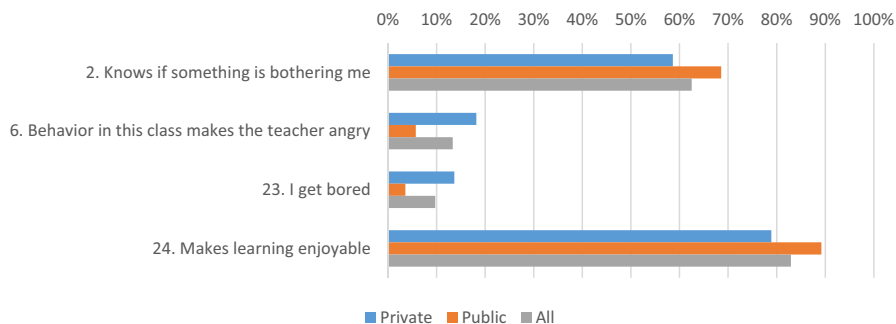


Fig. 2 Percentages of survey responses marked as 'true' (mostly or totally) of private school students compared to public school students that differed by more than 10%

Comparing schools with higher average SEA to those with lower SEA, little difference was evident in students' views of what they considered true about effective teachers' classrooms. The largest difference observed as shown in Fig. 3 was for item #8: *this class behaves the way the teacher wants them to* with 75% of students from schools with higher SEA believing this was true in comparison to 59% of students from schools with lower SEA. Similarly, 74% of students at higher SEA schools suggested it true that *this class stays busy and doesn't waste time* (item #10) compared to 62% of students at lower SEA schools.

Item #36 on the survey was an open-ended free response question that asked students what effective teachers do that helps to create and maintain safe and supportive learning environments. Using the 7Cs as a conceptual framework, we categorized students' responses to item #36 into one of the three themes, with some comments appearing in more than one category—see Table 3.

Nearly 50% of students' responses to item #36 could be categorized as addressing the theme of instruction: a teacher's ability to engage and captivate their students by creating interest, clarifying students' understandings of various concepts and consolidating this understanding especially through the use of useful and appropriate feedback. "They make the learning interesting, gets us working together not just from a book, they teach us in an interesting way that keeps us engaged and wanting to do the work".

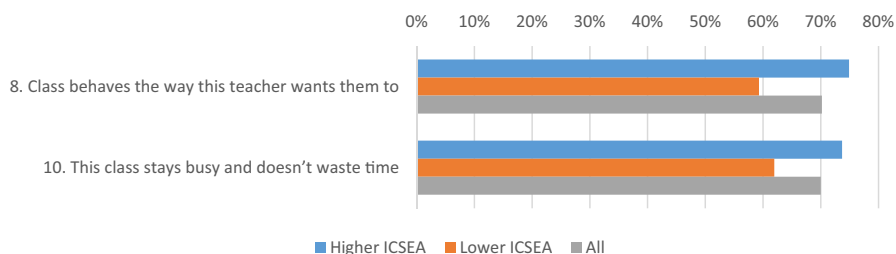


Fig. 3 Percentages of survey responses marked as 'true' (mostly or totally) for schools with higher average SEA compared to those with lower SEA that differed by more than 10%

Table 3 Number of coding references for each of the 7Cs (subthemes) and themes (SPS)

Themes	Number of coding references	Percentage of total responses (%)
Instruction	179	49.8
Captive	63	17.5
Clarify	75	21
Consolidate	41	11.3
Management	85	23.5
Challenge	31	8.5
Control	54	15
Relationships	135	37.5
Care	86	24
Confer	49	13.5

Another 37.5% suggested that a key strategy teachers use to create and maintain safe and supportive learning environments was to build positive relationships by showing genuine care and listening to students. “This teacher is caring, understanding and supportive and still makes sure we are learning. It’s just a great classroom environment”.

23% of the responses could be categorized as teachers’ ability to exercise authority without being rigid, threatening or punitive. “They are great at controlling the learning environment in a way that doesn’t intimidate or demean students”. In response to SPS item #36, students also used words such as *kind*, *effective*, *humour*, *relationship*, *understanding*, *interesting*, *respect* and *control* to describe teachers that create and maintain safe and supportive learning environments.

Stage 2: Focus Groups

The second (qualitative) phase of data collection comprised six focus group interviews—one at each participating school—with selected student participants, from the six different schools. Focus group participants were chosen from those students who had volunteered via the survey and who were available on the day. Each group consisted of either five or six students, with a mix of male and female participants where possible. All students who participated in the focus group discussions had completed the SPS, which served to prepare students for the topic, ready for focus group discussions.

Questions such as the ones below were posed:

1. Do students choose to behave well in some classes and not so well in others?
2. Why do you behave for some and misbehave for others?
3. What do teachers say and do that cause you to behave better and do more work?
4. What do teachers say and do that cause you to behave worse and do less work?

Table 4 Number of coding references for each of the themes and subthemes (focus groups)

Themes	Number of coding references	Percentage of responses coded (%)
Instruction	79	35
Engage (captivate)	43	19
Explain (clarify)	27	12
Feedback (consolidate)	9	4
Management	60	26
Responsibility (challenge)	25	11
Order (control)	35	15
Relationships	91	39
Relationship (care)	72	31
Student voices (confer)	19	8

5. What do you think makes for a good teacher?

Similar to the analysis of responses to the open-ended SPS item (#36), we categorized comments into subthemes to further reflect the 7Cs used in the survey. These then formed the basis for three overarching emergent themes, with some comments appearing in more than one category, as shown in Table 4.

Meeting students' needs through caring relationships

Meeting students' needs through caring relationships was a theme that arose during focus group discussions. Students expressed two critical attributes: the development of *caring and respectful relationships* with their teachers; and the *importance of students' voices* being heard by teachers. The establishment of caring relationships through support, encouragement and trust was important to students and seen as the result of mutual respect between staff and students. Teachers "earn respect by building a relationship with you, getting to know you, through knowing that they care about what they're teaching and that they care about you".

Another student described how a positive relationship between teachers and students contributes to positive behaviour. "It's the most important thing, I won't do any work for teachers I can't stand but those that give a ... you know which ones those are and you kind of want to do the right thing by them". Students discussed feelings of not being supported or encouraged by their teachers and how some teachers are quick to dismiss students, often resulting in the use of 'put downs' or the transmission of lack of feeling or commitment. Students' thoughts were best encapsulated by one who noted, "some teachers don't realize that students have feelings". While students understood that sometimes teachers would get annoyed, they believed teachers should always show a commitment to students' welfare.

Students noted the importance of having their voices heard suggesting that their best (most effective) teachers “say hello to you and they want to know about you, they want your input”. Similarly, students commented that their opinions were important yet were not always listened to: “some teachers just don’t even listen to you so why listen to them?” For these students, the opportunity to ‘speak up’ depended on the teacher and class; opportunities were provided by “good” teachers but not others. “They’re talking to you, asking you questions, they want you to have a say, you don’t really have time to misbehave”.

Overall, these students valued strong relationships with teachers, built on mutual respect, caring and trust.

Managing through responsibility

The second theme to emerge from the focus group discussions with regard to markers of effective classroom management could be categorized as the teacher’s ability to manage: their *ability to exercise authority and control through building student responsibility*. Students expressed two main attributes, the *teacher’s ability to maintain control and order within the classroom* and the *ways in which teachers challenged all students to do their best behaviourally and academically*.

These students suggested that often control in the classroom was synonymous with power and that there are two extremes to this:

It’s a matter of, one end where they are just full on, I’m going to smash your head in, or I’m going to make life hard for you, and I’m the boss and you’ll do as I say; or it’s the other side, they don’t do anything and so you can get away with anything.

Students’ perceptions of teachers who over-exert their power was quite pertinent:

It’s almost like the power has got to their head, that’s what I feel. If they come on too harsh, it’s just going to make the student react even worse because them shouting at us isn’t the right way to set us straight. I think that’s what causes a lot of students to feel isolated and unresolved.

This contrasted with teachers perceived as ineffective and who did little to establish classroom control: “I think sometimes they don’t notice it... They don’t intervene. They just kind of let things kind of carry on, and then it keeps building and building”.

What all students agreed important was balance, teachers who were able to be the authority, but without being mean or punitive:

You want a bit of a balance. You want them to get along with you well, but you also want those boundaries and expect those and if there are no boundaries, if they’re too “friendly-friendly”, then you muck up. But if they’re too nasty you’ll muck up as well.

Balance was difficult for these students to define but when asked what it was that the “good” teachers did that seemed to help maintain a positive classroom environment

the following responses sum up their perceptions: “the good ones don’t get angry, they just stay calm and deal with it and they don’t put you down, they have boundaries but they’re not mean about them, they make you take responsibility and deal with it”.

These students also expressed strong views on responsibility and control, stating that they chose to behave or misbehave depending on the teacher and their perceptions of his or her ability to establish and maintain order. Furthermore, this was done without threats or intimidation but through ensuring students take responsibility for their learning and behaviour. From these students’ perspective, *how* a teacher achieved order is just as important as *whether* a teacher achieved order.

Teacher skills/strategies to engage students in learning

The role of instructional management: a teacher’s *ability to engage students in learning* was the third theme that emerged from the focus group discussions. Students expressed three critical teacher attributes: *the teacher’s ability to clarify or explain what is being learnt*; *the variety of ways in which teachers captivate and engage students in learning*; and, *the clear feedback teachers provide to help consolidate learning*.

These students revealed that the teachers in whose classes they tended to misbehave were generally those they believed had little ability or interest in engaging them in their learning.

Some are just crap at teaching - they go and just sit under a computer or sit at their desk and give you a worksheet, you sit there and talk or whatever. They don’t explain well, don’t make it interesting and they just make everything so complicated in the classroom, and boring.

However, these students also suggested that sometimes it is their dislike of the subject that can lead them to misbehave. “If a teacher isn’t passionate about a subject, then he or she does not put in the work to share his or her passion. When you don’t feel their passion you don’t have a reason to be intrigued”. Further, these students valued teachers who clearly explained key concepts as opposed to teachers who expected students to “*just get it*”:

They just can’t explain it. They don’t know how to explain it to you to make you understand, and they get so angry. They’ll be like “I taught you that, and you should already know how to do it”. And then they just ignore you completely.

Students explained that the ability to challenge and raise students’ performance was most keenly observed in a teacher’s style and methods of engagement. As one student described:

Every lesson is a different thing. For some teachers you’ve learned a topic and then you do the work from the textbook for the rest of the lesson, whereas

good teachers are the ones who are changing it up and making you do something online, or do some questions, or asking you questions... and not the same person every time so you actually get the class engaged.

Participating students expressed views about teachers' skills at engaging students in learning, preferring those who demonstrate passion, enthusiasm, understanding and a sense of humour. These students commented frequently on how the attitudes of teachers affect their desire to learn. Students preferred teachers who employ a teaching style that is appropriate to the abilities of the class, allows interactive learning and inspires all students.

Discussion and conclusion

In Australia, as in other countries, the introduction of teacher professional standards has prompted a re-examination of approaches to both Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and teacher professional development. One area in particular that requires further attention is that of effective classroom management, a key dimension of both teacher preparation and practice, and an important factor in early-career teacher attrition (Buchanan et al. 2013). Further, in the effort to improve teachers' classroom management and its development within ITE programs, it seems important to take strong consideration of students' views of the practices that comprise effective learning environments. In recognizing the importance of students' views, this study therefore gives voice to the experiences of young people as key stakeholders in school improvement (OECD 2006).

As much of the existing literature on effective teaching and classroom management has canvassed teachers' views (Schunk and Meece 1992; Woolfolk Hoy and Weinstein 2006), this study contributes a much-needed perspective—that of students, one of two key participant groups in classroom interactions. In doing so, certain insights to existing literature are evident. Whilst some may question the validity of students' views around what is happening in classrooms (Hadfield and Haw 2001), this study shows that students offer quite insightful representations of what existing research would deem to be effective with regard to teaching and classroom management. These student views corroborate and consolidate three key elements of effective classroom management and show quite clearly that whilst students' actions and interactions are quite purposeful (Schlosser 1992; Sheets 2002; Sheets and Gay 1996) they are also managed well by caring, commanding and compelling teachers. This study, therefore, gives teachers clearer understanding, from the perspective of students, about what it means to be caring, commanding and compelling in how they teach and interact with young people.

This study provided students with opportunities to express their perspectives regarding the things that teachers do to effectively manage teaching and learning. In survey and focus group phases, students first characterized and then commented on aspects of classroom management, classroom discipline and socialization. One conclusion reinforced in the study is the understanding that students can, and do, hold well-articulated views about their learning and school experiences (Ainley

1995; Hadfield and Haw 2001). When given the opportunity to share perspectives about effective classroom management, teaching and their learning students did so with confidence and clarity, offering insights into what they want and need in terms of learning and schooling and articulating what constitutes effective classroom management.

Our analysis of students' survey responses by gender, school sector (private and public) and school SEA allowed us to determine the extent to which differences are evident between these groups in their perceptions of effective classroom managers. The analysis showed little difference among groups, and suggests that students hold widely shared (perhaps universal) views on effective classroom management. In particular, participants agreed that students choose to behave well in some classes and not so well in others. Students explained that teachers they like, respect, and believe show genuine concern for students' welfare and learning were more likely to be those in whose classes they behaved. Those teachers who tried to dominate, who they found difficult to understand or who just did not seem to care about students or their learning were the ones for whom they would tend to misbehave. The survey results also showed that all of the attributes defined in the 7Cs framework (Tripod Project 2011)—care, control, clarify, challenge, captivate, confer and consolidate, were evident in classrooms identified by students as effective environments for learning.

Focus group discussions revealed three core themes: meeting students' needs through caring relationships between teachers and students, classroom control through facilitating student responsibility, and effectively engaging students in learning. Students believed having a voice and being heard by teachers was key to building positive relationships and indicated that trust and encouragement were fundamental aspects of their relationships with teachers in addition to high expectations and appropriate challenges. They appreciated those teachers who held them accountable, yet gave them responsibility with support and structure. Students enjoyed and benefited from learning experiences that were varied, engaging and clearly articulated. They recognized that teachers' attitudes, dispositions, and approaches to teaching are influential for their learning and school experiences. These views on effective classroom managers are consistent with those identified by various researchers, none more so than Woolfolk Hoy and Weinstein (2006) who found that students believe that "good" teachers establish caring relationships with students, exercise authority without being rigid, threatening or punitive, and "make learning fun" (p. 187).

Limitations

Notwithstanding these contributions, this study is not without its limitations. Utilizing all student survey responses resulted in noticeably different subgroup sizes. Specifically, surveying a large number of private school students resulted in a higher proportion of male participants. Whilst this obvious disparity between group numbers was in some ways not ideal, this imbalance was offset by the findings of very little difference between responses of students who attend different types of

school and particularly in the comparison of private school males to all others. The decision to compare the groups according to the percentage who indicated that something was ‘true’ for them, and to provide group-wise comparisons this way rather than through inferential techniques that could have highlighted statistical significance (or not) was taken to ensure that the emphasis remains with the descriptive analysis presented in the second part of the study through analysis of data from the focus group discussions.

Additionally, choosing to limit the research to Western Australia metropolitan high schools can be seen as a limitation to the applicability of our findings to students, teachers and schools in other places. ICSEA values for Perth metropolitan high schools have a much higher average value than those of all schools leading to schools in this study having a higher average than that devised by ACARA.

An obvious extension of this research would be to compare and contrast the views of teachers with those of students. Whilst researchers have investigated students’ and/or teachers’ perspectives, very few have investigated both groups simultaneously, and none have compared the views of students against those of the teachers they nominate as being effective (Cothran et al. 2003; Ferreira and Bosworth 2001; Garrett et al. 2009; Garza 2009; Garza et al. 2010; Lewis et al. 2012; Woolfolk Hoy and Weinstein 2006). Having gained some insight into the perceptions of a particular cohort of students about effective classroom management, the next stage will be to investigate the knowledge and beliefs of teachers identified as being effective. This would further enhance understanding of effective classroom management of teaching and learning and reveal how students’ views converge or diverge with the views of their teachers.

Core findings from this study re-affirm that classroom management is multidimensional. Statements such as ‘it’s all about the relationships’ or ‘it’s all about the rules’ are too simplistic as each of the aspects of effective classroom management impact and influence the others, including caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities for participation and contribution. This has important implications for how we prepare new teachers and for ongoing teacher training and development. Do we attend sufficiently to the multidimensionality of classroom management in our initial teacher education programs? Do we do this overtly or expect it to be learnt on the job? The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers already form the basis for national consistency in the registration of teachers, teacher performance and development, and the accreditation of initial teaching programs. It is also important, however, that the Standards reflect current research into effective classroom management, and particularly research grounded in the daily realities of classroom life as experienced by its most central participants—the students themselves.

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Helen Egeberg BA University of Melbourne; MEd University of Western Australia. Helen is a Lecturer and Course Coordinator in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University. She is currently a Ph.D. student under the supervision of Associate Professor Andrew McConney. Her research is centered on the development of safe and supportive learning environments for all students.

Andrew McConney BSc Toronto; MS, PhD Florida Tech. Andrew is Associate Professor of Program Evaluation, Research Methods and Classroom Assessment in the School of Education at Murdoch University. As an educational researcher and program evaluator, in Australia and the US, Andrew has directed or co-directed numerous grants and contracts related to teacher education, teacher evaluation and teacher effectiveness, school system reform and improvement, and the evaluation of science, mathematics and environmental education programs.