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High school students' views of learning and the school experience

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Groves & Welsh High school students' views about learning and the school experience Page 1

High school students' views of learning and the school experience

Abstract

Increasingly it is recognised that high school students' views about learning and school experiences are important considerations in education. Students' insights are important as a basis for their active and productive involvement.

This paper reports on the learning and school experiences of 14 Year 11 students at a high school in Perth, Western Australia. The students completed a survey to stimulate their thinking and to uncover emergent themes. They then took part in focus small group discussions, facilitated by an outside researcher, where they were given the opportunity to express their views, opinions and insights regarding their own learning and school experiences. The data from the surveys and interviews were analysed and significant themes emerged. The study reinforced the idea that students do hold well-articulated views about their own learning and school experience. When given the opportunity students expressed their insights and opinions clearly. The findings revealed several factors that students perceive influence their learning and school experiences, including meeting students needs, student voice, relationships, responsibility and control, and teacher qualities.

Introduction

Students' views about learning and school experiences should be important considerations in education. However, these views, opinions and insights are rarely sought directly from the students themselves. This study asked high school students to express their views, opinions and insights about their personal learning and school experiences. Fourteen Year 11 students, all completing their Tertiary Entrance Examinations at a government school in the Perth metropolitan area, participated in the study, which used a qualitative approach, interpretive in nature, to explore students' perceptions as unveiled through a survey and focus group discussions.

Theoretical Framework

Young people within society are capable of holding well-articulated views regarding all aspects of their life, including learning and school. Students' views offer accurate insights into how they feel, what they want and what they need in terms of learning and schooling (Ainley, 1995). Identifying and understanding the factors that students perceive as affecting their learning and their overall school experience is an important process that should not be taken lightly. Students' perceptions of school, learning, teaching and themselves are of importance if we are to ensure all students are engaged, active and confident in their learning and school experiences (Ainley, 2004; Fullarton, 2002; Martin, 2003; Romanowski, 2004).

Importance of student voice

Today, schools strive far from the single dimensional realms of yesteryear (Ainley, 1995; Jarvenoja & Jarvela, 2005; Patrikakou, 2004). The intention of schooling is no longer fixated on the transfer and absorption of information. Schools are shifting from their sole objective of academic achievement and success, to also include a more rounded and inclusive focus on the development of the whole individual. The academic and developmental successes of students share equal worth and measure (Fullarton, 2002; Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1998). Fullarton

describes this shift from a focus on what is learned to a focus on what it takes to develop the learner. Silins and Murray-Harvey recognise and emphasise the growing responsibility of Groves & Welsh High school students' views about learning and the school experience Page 2 schools to provide and encourage an array of experiences that enable and ensure the psychological, emotional, social and physical development of individuals.

The world in which young people live today is noticeably different from the one in which their parents grew up and were educated (Hiebert, 2002). To ensure survival and success in today's world, particularly when it comes to education, young people need to be wellequipped with appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes. Hiebert suggests that we, as a society, are only beginning to identify and understand the nature of this change, and the associated knowledge, skills and attitudes our young people require in order to successfully navigate themselves through learning, school and life. Listening to the needs and wants of young people, as expressed by young people themselves, enables society to provide the appropriate and necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes, so that they can survive and succeed, and become active and engaged participants in their learning experiences (Hiebert).

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

Traditionally, students' opinions and views with regard to their learning and school experiences have been underrepresented. Students have repeatedly been on the outside when it comes to discussing what students want and what students need in terms of learning and school experiences (Roberts & Kay, 1997). Johnson (1991, as cited in Shaughnessy, 2001b) states, "the only group whose voice seems strangely absent in this chorus of ideas and counter ideas is that of the students themselves" (p. 11). Fullan (1991, p. 70, as cited in MacBeath, 2001) poses the question, "What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?" (p. 11). For some this is unnerving, whereas for others it is an empowering question, one that causes many students to stand up and demand to be noticed. It is this question, and the many more questions it evokes, that has seen the student voice grow louder and more powerful in recent times (Education Evolution, 2005; MacBeath, 2001). In many cases, students now have the confidence to take hold of the reins of their learning and school experiences and steer them in the direction of empowerment, engagement and success (Osborne & Ireland, 2000; Shaughnessy, 2001b, 2001c). Students' perceptions are important for various reasons, such as the valid and unique perspectives they can offer; the learning opportunities for others that listening and incorporating students' views can provide; and, the strong influence students' views can have on their learning and school experiences. Roberts and Kay (1997) identify that students' views have the potential to "provide new or deeper insights that present challenges and opportunities for the adults who are most directly responsible for what happens" (p. 1).

Listening to, and incorporating students' views is not only about acknowledging and preserving the active role of students in their learning and school experiences. Shaughnessy (2001c) puts forward the concept that schools, teachers, parents and administrators, who are all adults, could learn something from the views of students, stating that "students have much to say and to offer about changes that must be instituted so our high schools can develop" (p. 7). MacBeath (2001) and Shaughnessy (2001b) identify several areas where adults can learn from listening to students' opinion and input, including classroom management, learning and teaching, and school as a social and learning place. Shaughnessy goes on to point out that "these are areas that teachers traditionally address and where students rarely have input, but Groves & Welsh High school students' views about learning and the school experience Page 3 they do have a distinctive vantage point as learners" (p. Importance of Student Voice, Student

views are distinct section).

Students' perceptions of learning and school experiences

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

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

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

Teachers are one of the greatest influences in a young person's life. The effects teachers have on that person are carried right through to adulthood (Barry & King, 1998). Roberts and Kay (1997) comment that "students make highly consistent judgements about the quality of that teachers' teaching" (p. 3). Students continue to consistently identify teacher characteristics that they view as being significant such as subject area knowledge, enthusiasm, approachability, consistency and fairness, being respectful, acknowledging both good and bad behaviour, and making learning applicable to 'real life' (Betts, Zau, & Rice, 2003; Postlethwaite & Haggarty, 2002; Roberts & Kay, 1997). Roberts and Kay suggest that teachers and schools need to become more consistent to ensure student comfort, confidence and success. Students do recognise the important role and impact teachers have on learning and school experiences.

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

Students identify the reputation of the school and the overall school atmosphere as two further factors that contribute to their learning and school experiences. Shaughnessy (2001b) states that students prefer a school with a strong sense of community with the following characteristics: close relationships between students and teachers, teachers and teachers, and between the students themselves; support of individual needs, interests and lifestyles; students and staff working together; and, the opportunity to voice opinions. A positive school reputation and atmosphere enhance student responsiveness toward learning and satisfaction with school (Batten et al., 1991b).

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

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

The study

The idea of the study was to talk with students and to uncover how they perceive their learning and school experiences. The methodology and methods used have enabled us to ‘get inside the heads’ of a group of Year 11 Western Australian school students and to hear direct from them how they view learning and schooling. The research study consisted of two stages of data collection, a pilot study and a main study.

The study was centred on a qualitative approach, enabling deep exploration of the secondary school student participants’ perspectives (Creswell, 2002). The study was interpretive in nature with a focus on the observation, exploration and interpretation of secondary school students’ perceptions concerning learning and school. We sought to explore the views of students through discussion and to then interpret these views to enhance understanding.

The study participants were 14 Year 11 TEE students, both male and female, from a government high school in the southern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. The sample to be involved in the study was selected based on a nonprobability sampling technique termed ‘convenience sampling’ (Cresswell, 2002). A pilot study was conducted as a preliminary Groves & Welsh High school students’ views about learning and the school experience Page 5 form of investigation prior to the main study, with the pilot group made up of six Year 11 TEE students from a different government high school located in Perth, Western Australia. Directive questions and topics for the focus group discussions were generated according to the findings from a survey conducted prior to the focus group discussions.

The study exhibited an emergent nature in an epistemological sense because the themes that formed the framework for the discussion emerged from the findings and the topics for discussion were dependent on the students’ responses to the survey. Each phase of the study relied on what occurred in the phase prior. Holloway and Todres (2003) describe the need for a certain degree of flexibility when conducting research and the need to find a methodological approach that is beneficial to all stages of the study, “*appropriateness* rather than *method for method’s sake*” (p. 346).

Focus group discussions were the main form of data collection. The discussion topics were developed from the survey responses and focus group discussion results obtained during the pilot, and also the survey responses gathered during the main study.

Findings

Fourteen students participated in the main study, each completing a survey and participating in a focus group discussion. Five themes regarding the learning and school experiences of the student participants emerged, each with sub-themes. These themes were *meeting students' needs*, *student voice*, *teacher qualities*, *relationships*, and *responsibility and control*. These emergent themes and sub-themes are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Emergent themes and sub-themes from the focus group discussions with study participants regarding learning and school experience

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

Meeting students' needs

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

Groves & Welsh High school students' views about learning and the school experience Page 6

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

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

The students revealed that they most enjoyed and found most beneficial being involved in a variety of learning activities. All members agreed that they benefit greatly from a combination of bookwork, such as, textbook readings, worksheets and written activities, and practical work, such as, experiments and hands-on activities. Of doing only bookwork, Gillian stated,

“every so often it is OK, but if you do it all the time it gets boring”. Isabelle verified this opinion and went on further to explain the necessity for practical work, “I don’t mind doing bookwork and notes, but then we’re just writing it down, and half the time it doesn’t sink in. So we need to do something to make us remember”. Class discussions were an aspect of learning that the students identified as being both enjoyable and useful, commenting that they generate more interest, encourage student contribution and enhance learning. The lack of outside-of- classroom activities, such as field trips, was discussed. The students noted that these activities were rare, but were not disappointed by the lack of such activities suggesting that cost, organisation and management were the determining factors.

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

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

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

Groves & Welsh High school students’ views about learning and the school experience Page 7

Student voice

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

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

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

opinions are important and should be heard, yet they feel they are not actively listened to by the majority of teachers. It was agreed that while it depends on the teacher, the general consensus is that teachers are selective in what they want to hear from students. One student noted: "I think they [teachers] pick and choose. I think they [teachers] kind of choose what they think sounds reasonable then they'll [teachers] kind of play on it". Several students did discuss certain teachers that do encourage communication with them. One commented on one particular teacher:

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

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

Teacher qualities

Teacher qualities was the third theme, and three main sub-themes regarding teacher qualities and the effect this has on the learning and school experience of the students arose. These were *important personal characteristics of an effective teacher, teacher attitude toward students; and the teaching style of effective teachers.*

The students clearly described the characteristics and personal traits that they viewed as being important attributes of an effective teacher. Passion and enthusiasm were characteristics identified by the students as important, stating "I like it when the teacher is really into it [lesson/topic]". They also commented that an easy-going nature and a good sense of humour were also of importance to their learning and school experiences. Subject area knowledge - "someone who knows what they're talking about" - was a characteristic that students deemed imperative in their teachers and held in high regard. Other teacher characteristics that the Groves & Welsh High school students' views about learning and the school experience Page 8 students expressed as influencing their learning and school experiences were honesty, confidence and trustworthiness. Students commented that not all of their teachers possessed the characteristics they perceive to be important aspects of an effective teacher.

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

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

Students expressed clear views about personal characteristics of teachers preferring those who demonstrate passion, enthusiasm, honesty, trustworthiness, subject area knowledge and a sense of humour. They showed that they are affected by the attitudes of teachers and prefer teachers who employ a teaching style that is appropriate to the abilities of the class and allows interactive learning.

Relationships

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

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

And I think it also comes down to the teachers like trusting the class. I know Mr Smith trusts us to, oh how do I say this? He will give us set work and he'll teach us and if we don't understand it he'll come to us and he'll work one on one. So, I think he puts a certain level of trust in us, so that he's there for us if we need him and he will give us that motivation to do it, but it's down to us to get it done. He's not pressuring us, because I think too much pressure just kind of makes you go 'I am not going to do this if it is just for them, I want to do this for myself'.

The students discussed their feelings of not being supported or encouraged by their teachers and how teachers are quick to dismiss students, often resulting in the use of 'put downs' and derogatory name calling, following poor results. Several students recalled a time when they, or a fellow classmate, were told they were 'rubbish', told to drop a subject or told they were failing without advice to help them succeed. The students' thoughts were encapsulated by one, stating, "It happens quite a bit here. If a student's not getting the grades, the teacher or the school tells you to drop it". The students explained that they understood where the teachers', often brutal, honesty was coming from yet would have been more appreciative if Groves & Welsh High school students' views about learning and the school experience Page 9 they were to dispense such honesty with input on how to improve and develop their learning, commenting that they want teachers to tell them "honestly how you're doing, but to look at the positive side and how you can improve on that".

The students indicated that a trusting, encouraging and supportive relationship with parents was important to their learning and school experiences. The students noted that their parents trusted them to make the right decisions and were happy with the decisions they made regarding their learning and school experiences. One summarised the group's thoughts stating, "I know whatever I do my mum and dad will be happy either way". Students also discussed parental expectations as influencing student learning and school experiences, explaining that their parents do have expectations of them and want them to do well, reasoning "they've dedicated their whole lives to you". They acknowledged the support and encouragement that their parents expressed, and the associated guilt the students felt when they perceived they had not responded in the form of high marks or academic success. The students acknowledged the dual influence peers have in students' learning and school experiences. On one hand peers can be a distraction, whilst on the other peers can act as a network of support and encouragement. They commented on the role peers have in distracting students from their studies. They described how they were easily distracted by their peers during class time and study groups, and this resulted in much talking and laughter and little study. Some students noted the positive 'competition' that exists within their peer groups, describing this 'friendly competition' as "good, 'cos then you can strive to do better". Overall the students were very clear that they wanted encouragement, support and honesty from teachers, they value strong relationships with parents and peers and acknowledge that their peers can be a distraction sometimes as well as motivating at others.

Responsibility and control

The final theme of *responsibility and control* raised the three main factors of *the degree to which students demonstrate responsibility for their own learning, the importance of personal goals and future ambitions, and the priorities of school in terms of maintaining control and order.*

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

doing well:

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

You know the answers.

Mary shared Jeannine's view stating, "if I fail then I'm just like 'I didn't put enough effort in' simple as that". Ken agreed, stating, "I blame myself" (p. 5). Jeannine noted that she is not solely driven to attain knowledge to pass a test or exam, but enjoys learning for its own sake: I just like knowing things. I hate not knowing. 'Cos if someone else knows something, I want to know it as well. I just like having the knowledge. I like people asking me something and I know the answer. 'Cos I don't like going, 'umm I don't know the answer either.

Both groups discussed their prospects as influencing students' perceptions of learning and school experiences. The two focus groups expressed differing opinions with regard to their futures. One group discussed the importance of achieving personal goals, both long-term and short-term, whilst the other group referred to being driven by 'money'. The first group discussed the drive to 'be something' as influencing students' perceptions of learning and Groves & Welsh High school students' views about learning and the school experience Page 10 school experiences. They mentioned that the accomplishment of their short-term and longterm goals was a major driving force behind their attendance and achievement at school. Lila described her short-term and long-term goals as "get through Year 11 and 12 ... hopefully get into Medicine". Regarding achieving those goals Lila added, "I know Mary and myself, are having a second try at Year 11, I know she is definitely motivated, and I do want to achieve my goals". Members of this group expressed their belief in themselves. Mary described herself as being highly motivated because, "I just really feel that I can be something really good". Jeannine also demonstrated that she is driven to 'be something' and to achieve her goals. She stated, "I want to do well for myself, I want to be proud of myself".

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

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

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

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

Variations in the data

The nature of the study was to explore and interpret high school students' views and this has provided rich, complex and varied findings. Three aspects of the main study provide insights

into the complexity of the students' views and the variation within the data. These are a consideration of the different findings from the surveys and the focus groups, variation between the focus groups and variation within individuals.

Variation of findings from different data collection methods

The main study survey and focus group discussion findings showed different perspectives regarding students' views of their learning and school experiences. The survey findings suggested students' views of their learning and school experiences were predominantly positive. The focus group discussion findings tended to present a more critical view of the student participants' learning and school experiences. An explanation for this 'discrepancy' is that during the focus group discussions participants had the opportunity to articulate their views, opinions and thoughts in more depth. The survey simply required participants to indicate a response of strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree. There was no opportunity for participants to elaborate on their responses or to provide further comment regarding their learning and school experiences. During the focus group discussions participants had more time to think about their responses and to explain their responses in more detail. Participants were also in an environment with fellow students, which allowed them the opportunity to 'feed off one another'. The focus group discussions were necessary to obtain rich and detailed descriptions of students' viewpoints.

Variation of viewpoints between different focus groups

Analysis of the findings from the two focus group discussions brought to light some differing viewpoints of the two groups. Throughout the discussion one group expressed negative perspectives regarding aspects of their learning and school experiences, while the other group conveyed a more positive outlook. This difference in opinion was apparent in many of the discussions. The difference between the two groups may have been due to the participants within each group. Convenience sampling was used to select the participants for the study and for each of the focus groups. This form of sampling enabled groups to be formed based on the participants' availability. This sampling of the two groups meant that students were in groups with peers that they may have known well and others that they did not. The impact that participants had on the views of other participants provides an explanation for the different outlooks of the two groups. The interactions with fellow group members and the confidence students felt in order to express their views may have been affected by the presence of fellow students.

Variations in responses from individual participants

There were different views expressed by different individual participants and individuals also presented views at different stages that were contradictory. Gillian presented a positive stance regarding her involvement within the classroom and school, indicating on the survey that she did participate in the decision-making process both within and outside the classroom. During the focus group discussion Emily commented that she was not involved in the development of unit outlines or classroom rules but also implied that she would not necessarily want to be a part of it as she did not have enough time. Jeannine indicated a positive view on the survey towards her participation in decision-making and involvement within the classroom but during the focus group discussion she described her involvement as being minimal. Lila presented a positive viewpoint on the survey regarding her teachers' expectations of her as a learner, indicating that she perceived that her teachers did want her to succeed. During the focus group discussion Lila expressed a more critical viewpoint regarding her teachers and her success, commenting that she perceived her academic success was for the benefit of the school and not her development as a learner. Each of these examples of different individual viewpoints between the survey findings and the focus group discussion findings highlights the complexity of the study and the findings. The nature of the two data collection methods enabled the interpretation of the findings to be multifaceted and descriptive. The trustworthiness and credibility of the findings is heightened through this rich description.

Discussion

The findings and the research itself illustrate that students do have well-articulated views regarding their learning and school experiences. The complexity of the study and the topic became apparent throughout the study. Descriptions of the differences in the findings from different data collection methods, between the two focus groups and between the participants

themselves, while adding to the complexity also work to enhance the trustworthiness and Groves & Welsh High school students' views about learning and the school experience Page 12 credibility of the findings. The survey findings indicated an overall positive outlook on learning and school experiences, but when issues were discussed in more detail and participants were provided with the opportunity to explore their views they were more critical and descriptive. These differences reflect the emergent nature of the study and descriptions of them enhance the credibility of the findings.

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

The second conclusion drawn from the study relates to the complexity in the range of responses the study evoked from the student participants. The diverse range of views and insights offered by the participants reflects the complex nature of the issues underlying the study, the individuality of students and the importance of each student's voice. The findings of the study support and enhance this notion, reinforcing the capability that all students have to express valuable and meaningful insights regarding their learning and school experiences. These findings confirm that it is inappropriate to seek and accept the opinion of one person when it comes to seeking insights into the learning and school experiences of high school students. Each student has a unique viewpoint. To ensure rich and deep understandings of the learning and school experiences of students it is necessary that time is taken to speak directly with a range of students.

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

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