

Student Views on what Makes a Good Teacher

With the present study's emphasis on 'student voices', it was important to give students the opportunity to provide their views and insights about teachers.

Therefore, in addition to the information discussed in the previous chapter on relating to and working with their teachers, we asked students to think about teachers more broadly and express their views on what they most and least liked to see in teachers.

Emily's feedback follows.

What Makes a Good Teacher?

When we asked students in Phase 1 what they thought 'makes a good teacher' (or, in other words, 'what sort of teacher you would like if you could choose'), Emily had this to say:

For Emily, a good teacher is one who can joke, turn work into fun, and explain things well.

"[That] they weren't so serious, [that] they could joke. They could turn work into fun — not just boring stuff all the time. [I like it when] some comments are turned into jokes."

As also mentioned in the previous chapter, it was evident that Emily really valued teachers having a sense of humour. She valued it too when *"they are good at explaining"*.

Best Liked Aspects of Teachers

She liked teachers who are *"slow to anger."*

In subsequent phases of the study, rather than asking students what they thought 'makes a good teacher', we used a slightly modified version of the question. This was: 'Thinking about the teacher(s) you like **best** this year, what sort of things do you most like about them?'. Emily's reply in Phase 2 was:

And who *"know where we're coming from as teenagers"*.

"Some have close connection to all their students. And they are slow to anger. And when they get angry it's really time to settle down."

Some months later, building on the ideas she had expressed as a new Year 9 student, Emily again made reference to valuing it when teachers showed they had 'a close connection with their students'. That is, in Phase 3, Emily observed that the teachers she liked best were those who related well to young people, took an interest in them, and 'understood' them:

"They [most of my teachers] treat us like adults; they relate to us — not like [ie, in the same way as] our parents, in a different way, but they sort of know where we're coming from, as teenagers. We're more to them than just students. Two of them, they're like old people but they can [still] understand us. [Part of the reason they can understand us is that one] is an ex army [officer] and [the other] was a primary school teacher."

In Phase 4, as a Year 10 student, Emily once more emphasised the importance that she (and her peers) placed on teachers 'understanding' and valuing them as young people:

"Because they treat us like teenagers, not like little kids. They have respect for us. They talk to us how we want to be talked to. They listen to us and they give us chances. One teacher [told us she] was a naughty girl [at school] and she understands us. We respect her."

All Students

Best liked aspects of teachers

The students told us they liked it when teachers:

- demonstrated a sense of humour;
- listened to students;
- explained things clearly;
- helped them understand;
- made boring things interesting (eg, were flexible in their teaching approach);
- taught them new things.

Students also appreciated it when they felt teachers:

- understood them, and knew where ‘teenagers are coming from’;
- showed they liked, cared about, and had respect for their students;
- treated people fairly/were consistent;
- showed they liked teaching and were interested in their subjects;
- provided effective feedback;
- included them, and
- were friendly, ‘nice’, patient, and approachable.

In effect, it was evident that students wanted teachers who could teach them well and with whom they could have a positive relationship. For example:

- *“When they show they have an interest in teaching and a love for the students. They show they care about the students, by helping them out, listening to their side of the story — listening to what they have to say.”*
- *“They’re friendly, easy to talk to. Most of them have a good sense of humour. They give us warning before a test which is quite good. Some of them make things interesting, but mostly it’s that I just like them as people.”*
- *“Some of them make us laugh a lot. Our computer teacher helps us whenever we’re stuck. And she lets us have a lot of spare time on the computers. I like [teachers] who explain clearly and when it’s easy to ask them for help.”*
- *“Most of them are good teachers. A bad teacher is when they expect you to hand in homework on time but then give some students extra time, which is unfair. I have a good social [studies] teacher — expects you to do well. Probably will yell at you if you don’t want to do well. But there’s no point in going to school if you’re just going to muck around. I like it when they [teachers] are serious about your schoolwork, when they expect you to do well: I like that. Most teachers are good, but some are not so serious about your work: when you do bad in an essay, they just say **‘Do better’** but don’t talk to you about what you could do better. I like it when you get feedback: good teachers do that.”*

Least Liked Aspects of Teachers

It is hard when teachers “get angry all the time for reasons we don’t understand.”

Students were given the opportunity in Phases 2, 3, and 4 to comment on what they didn’t like about any of their teachers.

Early in her first year at secondary school, Emily’s least favourite experience of her new teachers was...

“...when they [some of them] get angry all the time for reasons we don’t understand.”

Emily wished for fun lessons, but reflected that teachers do not always have the choice about what they teach.

Later that year, what she didn’t like about some of her teachers was...

“...when they don’t listen, when they shout at us, and when they treat us like five-year-olds.”

But as a Year 10 student, Emily had a perhaps more mature view to offer. That is, instead of indicating things she did not like about any teacher she commented:

“I can’t say — nothing [I don’t like] about them, as people. Just the way they teach. They could make it more fun. But [it’s] not always their choice what they teach [ie, it is the curriculum so not their fault].”

All Students

What they least liked about teachers

Students were critical of teachers when they:

- were ‘boring’ in the way that they taught;
- didn’t explain things clearly;
- were not easy to approach for help;
- were inconsistent with punishments and rewards;
- became angry, growled or shouted ‘all the time’.
 - “They tell us off all the time. [Often it’s] just some students who are naughty but the whole class gets into trouble. They’re too grumpy. They don’t let us talk in class (not at all).”
 - “Some are mean and strict. Like when we’re not on time they don’t give us a chance to explain. Some of them, they treat us different from the girls — mainly me and my friends. They always think we’re automatically wrong, it’s not fair.”

Luke on Best and Least Liked Aspects of Teachers

Best liked aspects

Luke's view in Year 8 on what makes a good teacher was someone who...

"...has a good sense of humour, is funny, generous — [that is], helps us with our work, gives us rewards [ie, praise]. They're encouraging. Help us do our work. Help us understand."

Luke added a comment about his particular teacher that year, saying that she...

"...encourages us to do our work. Sometimes is funny [although] sometimes she says a joke and no-one laughs!"

In Phase 2, the aspects of teachers Luke liked best were that:

"They listen to you — they listen to our ideas so we [feel able to] put forward ideas in class. Some have a good sense of humour — they laugh in class. They explain it [the work] well. They teach us new things."

Luke's Phase 3 comments again emphasise the importance he placed on teachers demonstrating that they listened to students, showed that they had a sense of humour, and had the ability to clearly explain subject matter and make it interesting:

"They listen to us — they use our ideas when they ask for them. They're cool, they're funny. They are good at explaining — they make it clear. [They] sometimes make things interesting."

Once in Year 10, best liked aspects of teachers for Luke continued to be when teachers listened and showed that they liked to hold discussions with students, and when they made learning fun and interesting (at least some of the time):

"They like to talk to us — about the subjects. They understand us. They play games in class — it makes it interesting. Like in English we played a game where we were given examples of behaviour of famous writers [etc] and we had to guess who it was. It was fun."

Least liked aspects

Early in Year 9, Luke's comment on what, if anything, he did not like about his teachers was:

"Nothing really — except they get angry sometimes (at the class)."

Towards the end of Year 9, Luke again referred to teachers becoming angry when students misbehaved in class. He added that he felt that this was sometimes caused by students disengaging from the way they were being asked to learn:

"They get angry most of the time — when we don't do the work. We just don't settle down and keep on talking because it's boring. We work better if it's not boring. I don't like it when they make us copy out of books."

In Year 10, Luke once more focused on the way teachers reacted to students talking in class as the aspect he least liked about his teachers:

"They get angry sometimes. They get grumpy at us for talking." [Is it deserved when they get angry?]

"Yes, [it's often deserved] but I still don't like it."

Summary Statements on Emily's Preferences Regarding Teachers

This brief chapter reinforces themes evident in the previous chapter which discussed Emily's feedback about her relationships with teachers, particularly in the classroom. The information presented also has links with the data in Chapter Seven concerning Emily's views on aspects of learning in class at each phase of the study, and to data in Chapter Five on what helped students 'learn best'. And, as will be seen, Emily's views about teachers are integral to

her expressed attitudes towards some subjects, which is the focus of the following chapter.

Feedback from study participants — from Emily, from Luke, and from the students overall — reveals a great deal of consistency in what students most and least liked to see in teachers, with a sense of humour and ability to make learning interesting and fun being top of the list of the most desirable characteristics and teachers 'growling a lot' being the most frequently mentioned 'least liked' behaviour.