Student–Teacher Relationships

Teachers are integral to students’ experiences of, and attitudes towards, school. This chapter discusses Emily’s relationships with teachers from her own point of view as well as giving a parental perspective on how Emily felt about her teachers.

What Emily had to say is then compared with teacher feedback about her, to enable us to see where they had views in common and where their opinions diverged. There is, for instance, evidence from this study and other research to suggest that teachers and students sometimes have quite different perceptions of their common relationship.

As in previous chapters, references are made to Luke and to participating students overall.

Emily’s Views about her Teachers

With some qualifications, discussed below, Emily felt very positively about her teachers.61

Commenting on her Year 8 teacher, Emily stated:

“Sometimes if we’ve been told something she [teacher] changes it and it’s confusing. It gets a bit frustrating. [But] she’s always bubbly and happy; always willing to talk. If you have a problem, she gets on with it [to help you].”

From other remarks, it was also evident that Emily valued this teacher for her sense of humour and because she could make learning fun.

Contrasting Views about Teachers

Once at secondary school, our students were asked if they had ‘different feelings about different teachers’. In Phase 2, Emily answered ‘yes, definitely’. She explained:

“Some teachers I can really get along with. [But] some teachers are there just to teach [us] and not to have fun. Some teachers really enjoy the kids and get along with the children. They joke around and don’t mind if we’re giggling amongst ourselves. Others just get real angry — [but I] still like them ’cause they haven’t done anything to me.”

By the end of Year 9 (Phase 3), although Emily liked “the majority” of her teachers ‘very much’, her responses when asked how she would describe her overall relationship with each of two core subject teachers62 showed that she had much more definite, and differentiated, views about particular teachers. For instance, Emily rated her relationship with one of these two teachers as ‘not at all good or positive’, explaining that this was…

 “…because s/he treats us like primary children and s/he doesn’t listen to us, s/he just shouts at us,”

whereas she described the relationship with the other teacher as ‘excellent/very positive’:

“S/he’s the coolest teacher ever because s/he relates to us.”

It continued to be evident in Phase 4 that Emily responded to her various teachers in different ways:

“Some teachers I really, really like — six of my teachers. Some I tolerate as I respect them for what they do.”

Emily generally felt very positively about her teachers.

She valued teachers with a sense of humour, and who liked young people.

There is ‘liking’ a teacher and ‘respecting them for their ability’.

61 At each data collection phase, students rated how they mostly felt about their current teachers. In Phases 1 and 4, from a five-point scale, Emily chose the second most positive response, ‘I like my teacher(s)’, to describe how she felt, and in Phases 2 and 3 her response was, overall, ‘I like my teachers very much’.

62 The purpose of these questions was to gather information which would help inform us of the possible impact of a student’s attitudes about a teacher on their attitudes to the subject being taught by that teacher (Students’ feelings about teachers in relation to subject preferences are discussed in Chapter Ten.) Because it was not feasible to gather data on students’ views about all of their teachers, we chose to ask about their mathematics and English teachers only, as these subject areas linked to the asTTle focus areas of maths, reading and writing.
Overall, students were much more positive than negative about their teachers in general. But it was also evident that students in Phase 1 were considerably more likely to say they liked their teachers or liked them very much than they were in subsequent phases, especially in Phase 3.

The considerable increase in the proportion of students who gave the ‘sometimes I like my teacher(s) and sometimes I don’t’ answer post-transition is no doubt in part due to the difficulty of making an overall judgement about multiple teachers compared to often just the one teacher they were rating in Year 8. However, it is also indicative of other data from the study that many students were becoming increasingly discerning about what they most and least liked about their teachers (as discussed further in the next ‘All Students’ section), and about what and how they liked to learn.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>View about teacher(s)</th>
<th>Phase 1 %</th>
<th>Phase 2 %</th>
<th>Phase 3 %</th>
<th>Phase 4 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like my teacher(s) very much</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like my teacher(s) and sometimes I don’t</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t like my teacher(s) much</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t like my teacher(s) at all</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not sure</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I haven’t really thought about it</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing data</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note that in Phase 1 students were rating their main teacher for the year. However, to take into account the different situation at secondary school, in subsequent phases of the study students were required to make a rating on the basis of what they mostly thought about their teachers overall.

* After Phase 1, the wording of this option became: ‘It varies: I like my teacher(s) some of the time but at other times I don’t’. 
All Students

Contrasting views about teachers

In Phase 2, to the question ‘Do you have different feelings about different teachers?’, 20 percent of students responded ‘yes, definitely’ and a further 41 percent, ‘yes, quite a lot’. In contrast, close to 40 percent of students answered either ‘no, not really’ or ‘no, not at all: “I like them all”, “All good and help me”; “They are all kind and they are responsible.”

Comments from students who said they felt differently about teachers most often included references to why they liked or preferred some teachers rather than others. For example, although they quite often worded their responses in terms of what they did not like, they appreciated it when teachers:

- made learning fun, and interesting;
  - “Some of them are funny and fun and some of them make us bored out of our heads — they make it boring. They need to try to explain it in a more fun or interesting way — for example, real life examples.”
  - “Sometimes they’re just boring, so I don’t take an interest. They talk too much. We have to take lots of notes. Would like to do much more activities.”

- explained things well and helped when they were struggling;
  - “If you can’t understand it [the work], they say do it even though you say you can’t do it — they don’t believe you. They make you feel shamed: other kids think you’re brainy and when you have to ask for help — [it’s humiliating].”

- treated students fairly;
  - “Because some teachers treat you different. Sometimes they pick on you and they have teacher’s pets. It’s not fair. (They don’t really do it to me, but I see them do it to others.) Other teachers are more fun.”

- understood them as an individual/related well to them;
  - “Some understand you and some don’t. Some are real cool, some are real mean.”
  - “Good teachers get along with me. I like my favourite subject because of the teacher.”
  - “When you like the teacher, the subject is not an effort. I hated maths last year ‘cause I didn’t like the teacher. This year I really like maths ‘cause I really like the teacher.”

- demonstrated a sense of humour;
  - “Some are cool, they’re funny.”

- listened to them;
  - “Some understand you and stuff and they always listen and answer your questions.”

- were not too strict or grumpy.
  - “Because some are kinder than others, they don’t shout at us all the time if we are noisy: they just give us a warning and tell us to be quiet (eg. ‘if you don’t be quiet, you could get a detention’).”
  - “Some teachers are just ‘nicer’. A couple of teachers are nice and don’t growl but others shout at us.”
  - “Sometimes it’s the way some of them speak to us — growl at us all the time.”

Additional comments, often encompassing several of the categories above, follow.

- “I like my form teacher and my graphics teacher and my art teacher. They are my favourite subjects and they explain things better, making learning more fun.”

continued…
Contrasting views about teachers – continued

- “All teachers are OK but some are better — English and science are best. They make work more interesting: explain it easy, not strict, pretty fun, not boring people. PE [teacher] is pretty cool too — took us [to a recreation area] for a barbeque.”
- “I like teachers that explain things and make learning interesting and ones that can control and manage the class better.”
- “Some teachers talk a lot and I feel bored, some teachers don’t talk a lot but they just set us off to do the work and don’t give us any detail how to do it, but some do both [ie, explain well but don’t talk too much] and that makes me feel all right.”

Comments from other students, however, simply referred to individual differences in personalities and ways of doing things that you would expect to find amongst any group of people:
- “Different personalities: sometimes they are more like you so you get on with them better.”
- “Cause they teach different things: get different views from them.”
- “It’s to do with the teachers themselves because each teacher has a different personality and a different way to teach. I respond to the personality of the teacher, I think this is true for most students.”
- “Some are really interested in teaching, others really want to get to know you first.”

To further explore students’ views about different teachers and approaches to teaching and the possible impact of this on learning and achievement outcomes, we asked students in Phases 3 and 4 to describe their overall relationship with each of their English and mathematics teachers. The results are provided in the table below, followed by students’ written explanations for the ratings that they gave (mostly similar in kind to those listed above).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Relationship with English teachers</th>
<th>Relationship with mathematics teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phase 3 %</td>
<td>Phase 4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent (very positive)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good (mostly positive)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OK (not positive)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very good (more negative than positive)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all good or positive</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing data</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students’ ratings of their relationships with both their English and mathematics teachers were much more positive than negative overall. In general, however, students tended to consider relationships with their English teachers a little more favourably than those with their mathematics teachers. But, as well, it was evident that when two or more students were being taught by the same teacher, individual students were as likely to have contrasting views about that teacher as they were to express very similar views to those of their classmates.

continued…
All Students

Contrasting views about teachers – continued

The comments that follow illustrate some of the qualities that students particularly appreciated in their teachers. These qualities included teachers:

- showing that they understood and liked their students;
  - “She is very nice and she understands me.”
  - “She’s our form teacher too so she understands us.”
  - “We get along well. I like the way she treats us in class: the way a student wants to be treated, very kindly. I think that’s important.”
  - “He is really nice and he is understanding. He is cool and is a good teacher.”
  - “I can tell him anything; it’s a friendship.”
  - “I like maths and the teacher likes to teach me.”

- always being willing to help when students needed it and explaining things well;
  - “She’s funny and she helps you understand the difficulties.”
  - “He concentrates on students who get his attention and it stops him from teaching the class, but when he gets the opportunity he tries to help his students the most he can. He asks students if they need help but it is up to the student to decide. His help is very useful.”
  - “Very good maths teacher because she helps us when needed and makes things clear with us.”
  - “He is a good teacher who explains the work and how to do things and asks us if we need help or if we don’t understand.”

- having good class management and the ability to create a positive — interesting, fun, settled — learning environment;
  - “He’s very into it [the subject] and we do lots of anti-bookwork [ie, not bookwork] activities. He involves the class a lot.”
  - “He’s very funny and we learn in different ways.”
  - “He plans out what we are doing before we do an activity.”
  - “She has very good control over the class and teaches useful things.”
  - “Doing a very good job, very strict which a teacher is supposed to be. Also knows how to control the class.”
  - “He teaches good maths. He makes maths feel fun.”

- providing encouragement for students;
  - “She is always very positive about what we are learning. She wants us to do very well in fifth form [Year 11] next year.”

- showing enthusiasm for their subject.
  - “Very enthusiastic [about the subject]. Sometimes forgets we are here when she’s solving an equation!”

What students found difficult about their relationships with teachers included:

- when teachers rushed the work and didn’t allow enough time for students to adequately master aspects of it;
  - “She rushes us and expects too much.”
  - “He doesn’t explain things well enough for us to understand and he rushes and that’s a big problem.”
  - “Needs to let us practise the work more.”

continued…
All Students

Contrasting views about teachers – continued

• when they didn’t listen to students’ views;
  – “Too strict and needs to listen to what students are saying.”

• when they were not sufficiently available to help with problems;
  – “I need a little bit more help.”
  – “They need to help us more and not just hand us work which we have to complete.”

• when they allowed disruptive behaviours from some students to continue to the detriment of learning for the class as a whole;
  – “She doesn’t seem to be very good at managing a class and we hardly ever do anything fun, only bookwork.”
  – “He needs to control the class more because the other students take advantage of him: always talking and never working.”
  – “Needs to harden up: lets the kids get away with bad behaviour.”

• when they were too ‘grumpy’;
  – “He can stop saying that everyone’s gonna go on DT [detention] and not do anything about it. I want him to be more friendly and socialise with our class.”
  – “She is strict and angry.”

• when they did not create a learning environment that encouraged learning.
  – “I don’t really pay attention that much in class because it’s boring, how we do things — the activities. Group things I don’t like because the group doesn’t work together.”
  – “She’s real boring. Doesn’t sound like s/he’s into the stuff s/he’s teaching.”
  – “We need notes and all, but all [the teacher] gives us for maths is notes. At the start of last year and this year I had much better maths teachers but when we have a test to separate us, I’m always put into a top class with a bad teacher. Would much prefer going to my old maths class where I actually learn something.”

Parental Perspective on Emily’s Attitudes towards her Teachers

When asked which option ‘best’ described how their child felt about her teachers that year, Emily’s parents indicated in each of Phases 1 and 3 (data were not available for the other two phases) that Emily ‘mostly likes her teacher(s).’

There was a close match between Emily’s disclosures about her teachers and parental observations. In Phase 1, Emily’s parents reported that their daughter “generally liked everything” about her teacher. Likewise in Phase 3, their response was that Emily mostly liked her teachers. While they did not comment on the qualities that Emily appreciated in her teachers, they noted that what Emily did not like was…

“…being targeted [unfairly] in the classroom and the teacher not listening to her explanation.”

Teacher Views about Emily

We asked teachers a number of questions aimed at attaining their perspective on student–teacher relationships and interactions within and beyond the classroom.

63 The response options available were: ‘She likes the teacher(s) very much’; ‘She mostly likes the teacher(s)’; ‘Sometimes she likes the teacher(s) and sometimes she doesn’t’; ‘She doesn’t like the teacher(s) much’; ‘She doesn’t like the teacher(s) at all’; ‘Not sure/don’t know’. (Note that when Emily was in Year 8, the rating referred only to her main teacher for the year, whereas in subsequent phases of the study the ratings encompassed Emily’s views of her teachers at secondary school overall.)
Rating their Relationship with Emily

Once it was established how well a teacher felt they knew the student they were providing feedback about— in this case, Emily — we asked how they would rate their relationship with that student. Teachers before and after the transition rated their relationship with Emily as ‘excellent/very positive’. Emily’s Year 8 teacher went on to add that:

“Emily is easy to relate to — have built a strong relationship with her.”

And the Year 9 form/English teacher’s view was that Emily had an…

“…open personality, sense of humour — an amiable person who relates well with adults.”

Working with and Teaching Emily

A more specific question for teachers in Phases 1 and 3 about their relationships with individual students in the study was: ‘In general, how would you describe what this student is like to deal with and/or teach?’

The purpose of this question was three-fold: to learn more about our participating students, to gain greater understanding of the ways in which teachers may ‘define’ their experiences of the students that they teach, and to provide a point of comparison for what the students said they most and least liked about their teachers. Table 4 has the results for Emily.

A picture of Emily from a teacher’s perspective retained a high level of consistency over the course of a year, with her Year 8 teacher describing her as ‘fun’, ‘enjoyable’ and a ‘satisfying or rewarding’ student to teach and her Year 9 English teacher making a similar assessment: again describing her as ‘fun’ and ‘satisfying’, but also adding that she was ‘straightforward’ and ‘challenging (in a positive way)’.

It is interesting that both teachers described her as ‘fun’: a sense of humour and the ability to make learning fun were characteristics that Emily valued in her teachers and missed a great deal when she felt these were absent. Emily’s views about the best and least liked aspects of teachers are discussed further in the following chapter.

Table 4: Characterising Emily as a student to work with: teachers’ descriptions before and after transition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student ‘descriptor’</th>
<th>Phase 1: Year 8 teacher</th>
<th>Phase 3: Year 9 English/form teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Straightforward</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfying/rewarding</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worrying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging (in a positive way)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexciting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other comment (specify)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>(“Enjoyable”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before asking teachers specific questions about their relationship with a particular student, we first established how well they felt they knew them. Participants were provided with a scale on which to answer this: ‘Well/very well — the student is an open and easy young person to relate to’; ‘Not very well yet — I have not known this student for very long’; ‘Not very well — the student has been in my class all year but is not easy to get to know’; and ‘Other answer (specify)’. The Year 8 teacher had taught Emily all year but had not known her prior to that. The teacher answering in Phase 3 had taught Emily for English for several months and had been her form teacher over the same period. This same teacher provided feedback about Emily in Phase 4, in her capacity as Emily’s Year 10 form teacher.
All Students

**Teachers’ views on their overall relationships with students**

In Phase 1, from a list of descriptors provided*, teachers most often chose to describe participating students as ‘satisfying/rewarding’ (around two-thirds) and ‘fun’ (approximately half). While a further third of students in each case were characterised as ‘straightforward’, or conversely, ‘challenging (in a positive way)’, and just over a quarter as ‘easy’, 10 percent were considered to be ‘difficult’, 24 percent as ‘frustrating’ and 13 percent as ‘worrying’.

In Phase 3, the relative frequency with which each of these terms were chosen by teachers to describe students remained much the same, with the largest group of students being described as ‘satisfying/rewarding’ or as reasonably ‘straightforward’, plus around a quarter as ‘challenging (in a positive way)’, but with an important minority of students continuing to be regarded as ‘difficult’ or ‘worrying’.

* The descriptors were: ‘Straightforward’; ‘Satisfying/rewarding’; ‘Difficult’; ‘Frustrating’; ‘Easy’; ‘Worrying’; ‘Challenging (in a positive way)’; ‘Unexciting’; ‘Fun’; and ‘Other’.

The Teacher–Student Relationship: Comparing Views

The Year 8 teacher’s assessment of her relationship with Emily largely — it was a little bit more positive — matched Emily’s view of the relationship (see earlier discussion). However, there was a notable difference between Emily’s ‘not at all good or positive’ rating of her relationship with her Year 9 English teacher and this teacher’s perception of their relationship as ‘excellent/very positive’. This is especially interesting, as this teacher felt she knew Emily very well.

A further perspective on the teacher–student relationship came from teachers’ ratings of the statements: ‘[This student is] confident in her interactions with me’; and ‘[She] shows me respect’. The teachers who provided feedback about Emily in Phases 1, 3 and 4 answered that these two descriptors ‘always’ applied to Emily, suggesting that Emily’s thoughts and feelings were not necessarily reflected in her behaviour.

Teacher Ratings of Emily’s Behaviour in Class Compared to her Self-Ratings

The ways in which students behave, see themselves as behaving, or are perceived to behave by teachers or others in class are undoubtedly important factors in teacher–student relations (not to mention student–student relations). For this reason, teachers were asked to describe the behaviour of participating students in their particular classes. Teacher feedback about Emily in Year 8 was that she was ‘very well behaved’ in class, whereas a year later, in Year 9, her behaviour in class was described as ‘about average’ by her form class/English teacher. (Feedback was sought but not obtained from her maths teacher.)

As discussed in Chapter Six, we also obtained students’ views about their own in-class behaviour. Emily’s estimate of her behaviour in class in Year 8 was less positive than her teacher’s. Emily was aware that she talked a lot in class, while she declared she enjoyed talking too much to stop doing it, she apparently sometimes also felt guilty about it.

In contrast, her teacher, although no doubt annoyed about this talking at times, appeared to have a different perspective on it than Emily, perhaps either seeing her talking as part of everyday student behaviour, or possibly, considering Emily’s positive attitudes to learning and school, regarding her as very well behaved or rewarding relative to other students in class. It may be, too, that it was easy for the teacher to ‘overlook’ or minimise certain distracting behaviours because of Emily’s bright, likeable personality.

An additional point of interest is that the teacher reporting on Emily’s behaviour in class in Phase 3 gave a less positive rating (see above) than her Year 8 counterpart. However, the Phase 3 teacher’s response was much the same as Emily’s assessments of herself in class in each of Phases 1 and 3.
Views on Receiving Help from Teachers in Class

To provide further measures of teacher–student relationships and of the nature of the learning environment within the classroom, we wanted to know from students: whether they felt their teachers made it clear what they expected from them in their work, including clarifying work objectives or goals; whether they felt able to ask teachers for help with their work if they needed to; and what teachers did to help them improve their work or help them better understand. Discussion relating to these matters follows.

Teachers Clarifying Work and what they Expected from Students

In Phase 1, Emily felt that her teacher(s) ‘made it clear what they expected’ from her, whereas in Phase 2, she initially stated ‘Not really’. She elaborated on this by saying she was finding that some but not all teachers made it clear what they expected.

To some extent, this response is quite probably indicative of the process that students go through while learning to adjust to several subject teachers with their different requirements and approaches, a new experience for many since moving into Year 9. However, it also serves to illustrate how important it is for students to clearly understand what is expected of them, particularly at times of change.

In Phase 4 Emily’s response was that teachers ‘usually’ made it clear what they expected.

Approaching the Teacher for Help in Class

We asked students in Phases 1 and 2 ‘What do you do when the teacher has given you some work to do and you aren’t sure what to do?’. Emily’s reply in Year 8 was that…

‘…I ask my friends first — then if I still don’t have a clue I ask the teacher. [I ask my friends first] ’cause I know my friends understand me more.’

And as a relatively new Year 9 student, Emily’s response was almost the same:

‘Ask a friend [classmate] first and if they can’t explain it, would ask the teacher.’

Although Emily’s initial impulse was to ask her friends for help — perhaps, sometimes, because she did not want the teacher to know that she hadn’t listened properly to instructions, and also because asking peers probably felt more natural, especially for such a social girl — her answers indicate that she had no hesitation about approaching her teachers for assistance when required.65

What Teachers did to Help Students Understand their Work

Emily’s responses to the question ‘What does the teacher [or your teachers] do to help you improve your work, or help you if you don’t understand something?’ reinforce that she was comfortable about approaching teachers. Her comment in Phase 1 was:

“She [teacher] makes you understand easily. If you have a problem she’ll sit down and explain to you. She makes sure she’s explained clearly before she sends you off with a task.”

And in Phase 2 it was:

“They explain it a couple of times [and] tell us we can go to them if we have any problems. [Also], if we need to do something and we haven’t done it, some [teachers] give you an extension.”

The Phase 2 response suggests, perhaps, that while Emily mostly perceived her Year 9 teachers as willing to provide assistance if she needed it, she understood that they were possibly not quite as likely or able to spend time helping her as her Year 8 teacher had been.

Emily’s Phase 4 response was simply to say that teachers helped her to understand her work better…

‘…because they explain themselves clearly.’

---

65 Other data too reinforce that Emily was happy to approach her teachers for assistance if she required it. For example, Emily answered ‘definitely true’ at each phase of the study to the statements: ‘It is easy to ask the teachers for help…’ and ‘The teachers make sure everyone understands’ (refer discussion relating to Exhibit E in Chapter Seven).
Views on Teachers Providing Further Assistance with her Work

In Phases 2 to 4, we enquired if there were "more things you would like the teachers to do to help you with your work". On each occasion, Emily conveyed her belief that there was more teachers could do. While still very much in the midst of 'learning the ropes' in her new school, she would have liked teachers to:

"Explain their expectations better — what they expect of you. I get a shock sometimes at what you have to do at secondary school."

Emily had more specific suggestions later that year. She wanted teachers to provide:

"More fun activities — when it's boring we want to talk and they get angry. We would probably behave better if it was more fun, especially in English, art and technology this term."

Similarly, in Phase 4, Emily again wished her teachers would...

"...give us more fun activities. And they should rethink some of their topics. For example, instead of [the novel we have to read] in English, which we hate, we could read something like 'Holes' by Louis Sachar or read short stories by Witi Ihimaera, cause they relate to young Māori kids."

"I get a shock sometimes at what you have to do at secondary school."

She felt that "more fun activities" in class would help her learning.

All Students

On what teachers did to help their learning

Students most often felt that teachers best helped their learning when they:

• made learning fun;
• taught things in different ways, including encouraging student participation, and incorporating a range of activities into lessons rather than 'just book work';
• facilitated good dialogue between teacher and students;
• gave clear explanations and ensured that students had grasped what they had to do;
• provided effective feedback (on what and how they could improve as well as what they were doing well); and
• actively encouraged them as being capable learners.

Comments from students that illustrate these categories follow.

"They get through to you."
"They tell me never to give up. That advice makes you feel good, gives you more self-esteem."
"They involve the class: get different people to answer things in class. We have fun, do interesting things, not just text book work. In science we get to do experiments and not just do book work. (It's been very interesting doing experiments, [eg], using chemicals)."  
"We do fun stuff with them, like doing posters and making things as well, not just talking and writing. They let us go out of the classroom, like in PE."
"He doesn't growl a lot, takes it slow."
"They encourage me to learn and ignore the people that talk to me."
"They do the lessons in different ways so we stay interested."
"They use language we understand and explain things well — not like in science where they use really big words that we've never heard of."
"They trust me."
"Don't mind when we correct them, fun to learn with."
"They give you chances."
"They get students involved with the teaching process. It's more fun, more interesting."
"When I go to the maths teacher to check my work and when I say it's easy, and he is pleased."
"They don't make me feel stupid if I have questions for my study, they'll help me out."
### All Students

**On what teachers did to help them improve their work or help them if they didn’t understand**

Responses from students in Year 8 to the question ‘What does the teacher do to help you improve your work?’ focused on how helpful they found it when their teachers:

- explained clearly, especially when they provided some context for the topic or repeated their explanations, in different ways if necessary, until they understood;
  - “She makes sure we can understand. She tells us a bit about the subject. She looks around and makes sure everyone is on track.”
  - “He helps us by showing us an example. He uses easier language so we can understand — he makes us understand.”
  - “Tells me what to do clearly.”

- gave them one-to-one attention/instruction if they were having difficulty with the work;
  - “When I can’t do it, he takes time off from the rest of the class just to help me.”
  - “She sees that I’m not really good at something, so she gives me one-to-one help.”

- gave them effective feedback, showing where and how they needed to make improvements, as well as emphasising when they were doing well;
  - “She writes little comments on what I’ve been doing right and what I could do better next time. She helps me when I ask for tutoring and to explain.”
  - “She crosses out words that are wrong and puts the correct words in. She tells us when we are doing good.”

- were perceptive and well informed enough about them to know when to either give them work that would extend them, or adjust the work so that they could take extra time if they needed it, or do the task in a different way than others in the class;
  - “She changes the work and makes it easier for me.”
  - “Extends me — gives me harder work.”
  - “Helps me with grammar. Gives me extra time. Helps me find resources.”

- were easy to approach for help;
  - “She gives me advice on what to do to make things better. She explains things if I’m not understanding. She encourages us — tells me when I’m doing well. If we say negatives about it [work], she helps to encourage us — saying positives. She’s been very helpful: we’ve done heaps of things I wouldn’t have been able to do with my first teacher this year. Couldn’t really talk to my first teacher, was quite shy with him. I get along well with my new teacher. She’s good at explaining — or if not, it’s really easy to ask her for help. She’s been the first teacher it’s easy for me to talk to.”

- made it clear what the goals and expectations were;
  - “Sets standards: I usually achieve those standards.”
  - “Tells us how to do stuff: how he wants it done. Checks our books and writes notes about how we can improve.”

- offered practical tips (eg, how to find resources);
  - “She tells me how to research and she shows me examples.”

- simply provided encouragement.
  - “Just pushes us and encourages us until we get it right. She’ll read it out to you and you will pick up the mistake. Will give one-to-one help.”

continued…
An equivalent question — 'What sorts of things do the teachers do to help you improve your work, or help you if you don’t understand something?' — was put to students in each of Phases 2 and 4. Their responses on those occasions were very similar in range and nature to those described above. For example:

- "If you don’t get something, you ask and they’ll tell you. They’ll talk to you if they feel something is not going right or talk to you if it’s going right — they say when you’re doing well. It gives you encouragement. Or they will send letters home: blue slips if you’re doing well and pink slips if you’re not doing so well (I’ve had four blue slips so far, for English, performing arts, textiles and social studies)."
- "They tell us what the work really means."
- "They practically tell us to ask if we need help. They offer to help us in breaks or at lunchtimes (my English teacher)."
- "They spend more time with you when you need help, they explain it to you again (eg, in science, she gave me a table about ‘ions’ and I didn’t get it. I told her I didn’t understand and she explained it again the next day until I got it)."
All Students

On teachers providing further assistance with their work/learning

Although when asked ‘Are there (more) things you would like the teachers to do to help you with your work?’ the majority of students (at least 60 percent) answered no, there were also a quarter or more of students in each of Phases 2, 3 and 4 who felt that they would like (more) teacher assistance for their schoolwork. This was especially the case in Phase 3, with more than a third of students giving this response.

The sorts of assistance students wished for — often reflecting the same themes evident in responses to other questions, such as what they liked best or least about teachers, and what best helped them to learn — included:

• more one-to-one attention from teachers (most often mentioned by students in Phase 3);
• greater opportunities to learn in different ways (eg, ‘real-life’ approaches to what they were learning, rather than copying out of text books or off the board);
• teachers explaining more clearly what students were required to do, using more straightforward language, and checking that students really did understand the set tasks;
• being allowed more time to grasp certain topics or, alternatively, for some students, being given more challenging or demanding learning opportunities — in other words, teachers being more aware of ‘where they were at’ in their learning;
• more scope to learn in different settings;
• more group work in class and/or opportunities to talk to classmates about the work they were doing;
• more opportunities to revisit and practise new concepts; and
• being given more relevant work.

There were also a small number of students who wanted their teachers to be more aware of certain physical difficulties that they were experiencing, such as problems seeing the board and/or deciphering teachers’ handwriting on the board, and difficulties in writing, especially writing quickly enough to keep up with dictated notes.

And an additional wish expressed by some was that teachers could stop other students from being disruptive so they themselves had the chance to listen, understand and concentrate better.

Some illustrations of these points follow.

Phase 2

— “They could do handouts for us — a summary of their notes (key points) of what they’ve taught in class so we have a backup file. Sometimes they go too fast and we can’t keep up.”
— “Let us talk to friends in class about our work — we’re not allowed to. This is different from last year [at primary school].”

continued…
All Students

On teachers providing further assistance with their work/learning – continued

- "Teach slower so we understand, explain clearer."
- "Would like harder work for maths, maybe harder work for science."
- "Make it more interesting. Don’t do it out of the text book. More hands-on work, more practice."
- "Make it less boring (eg, in social studies). Maybe working in groups would help."
- "Answer the questions when we put our hands up. Explain it clearly."

Phase 3

- "Some teachers could make it more interesting: instead of just writing it down, teach it in a different way, ’cause we do a lot of writing and don’t really take it in, especially in science."
- "Do games outside and stuff. It’s too hard to sit in class all the time and write. Writing sucks: it’s just that I’m not good at it [the physical act of writing]."
- "They could make it a bit harder. Some of it is too easy, some of it is boring. It would help me try harder if it was less easy and less boring."
- "Move around and work with different people in class, ’cause it might help to hear their suggestions. [Would like] more group work, it doesn’t often happen."
- "Sometimes [for teachers to give] clearer instructions — write them on the board. They need to explain more clearly. No-one is listening sometimes and no-one knows what to do. Everyone keeps talking, it’s disruptive. The teachers spend too much time telling them off and so it’s frustrating for others."
- "Would like the teachers to write bigger so I can see: am expecting glasses soon, short-sighted."
- "Make it [lessons] more interesting. We’re not allowed to talk and have to copy a lot of stuff."
- "Have a reward system: if we did well the whole week, they could let us choose something we wanted to do (like using some of the gear in the PE shed)."
- "[Teachers to] go to each one of us and ask us if we understand what we have to do. Talk to us individually."
- "Come over [to me] more often [in class] in case I have a complaint [eg, if it is] too noisy) and to help me."
- "Sometimes to read a story to the class."
- "Sometimes to revise the lesson we just learned."
- "If I need help they can help me out. They sometimes say you should have been listening and I was but couldn’t understand."
- "[Teachers to] have control of the class. Teachers need to explain things more, but they can’t when they don’t have control of the class."
- "Give us revision time in class; give us more facts, like putting it into sentences and that."
- "They don’t always explain things well enough; I’d like them to explain things properly, and explain in several different ways."
- "Sometimes in English, the teacher’s writing on the board is hard to read — she writes a lot."
- "Every teacher is trying their hardest. They are good teachers but it is what they are teaching [that is the problem]."

continued…
All Students

On teachers providing further assistance with their work/learning – continued

Phase 4

− “Something different: do different topics from the ones we do. Can’t see the point of some of them. It would help if they [the teachers] explained why more [often], why we have to learn some things.”
− “Would like more experiments in science to make it more interesting.”
− “I wish our maths teacher would give us more time to practise it [new concepts] — you can’t learn it in one day. The rest [of the teachers] are OK.”
− “Sometimes [wish they would] explain what they want you to do better. More one-on-one help.”
− “Get us out of the classroom more often: we are usually in one place for the whole hour, which can be boring. Maybe do work outside if it’s a nice day [sometimes it gets too hot in the classroom].”
− “Change the learning environment [sometimes]. Maybe go outside a little: more space, change of scene.”
− “I’d like teachers to make things clearer sometimes. They could like go through it with me individually if I didn’t understand it. I’d like it [ie, one-to-one] more often. Some teachers don’t really do it [at all].”
− “Make it more exciting, because if it gets boring too quickly, people get less interested.”
− “I probably need more help with maths. The teacher is easy to approach but not easy to understand. And [s/he] needs to check better to see that you really do understand. S/he comes around and looks at my book and says ‘You’re doing really well, great’, when I haven’t even started doing the work [set] — when all I’ve done is just copy from the board. So [s/he] just assumes I know what I’m doing without checking for sure. And I’m getting behind.”

All Students

On teachers having expectations of them

Students’ responses in Phases 3 and 4 when asked whether they thought their teachers ‘usually expect you to do well in your studies’ are shown in the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Phase 3 %</th>
<th>Phase 4 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other response*</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing data</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* ‘Other’ responses were usually along the lines of ‘some teachers do, others don’t’, or that teachers ‘sort of’ or ‘kind of’ expected them to do well but it either wasn’t that obvious and/or they (the student) hadn’t thought about it very much: “Not sure why. Some are not so good at encouraging us.”

continued…
Students’ explanations for why they felt their teachers usually expected them to do well included that their teachers encouraged them, pushed them to work harder, tried to make them listen and attend so that they wouldn’t get behind in their learning, explained things well, provided assistance when required, and generally had faith in them.

− “My teachers do: they say, ‘You can do better!’ They’re probably right.”
− “They don’t like to see us fail. They make us understand.”
− “They talk to us individually during and after class. Say: ‘I expect you to do more and do better’ and say ‘You shouldn’t hang around with kids who talk a lot.’”
− “Because they always like tell us: ‘If you do well, you’ll have a great future.’”
− “Teachers want me to do well. They move me so I don’t get disruptive [otherwise] my classmate sits next to me and he often talks to me.”
− “She wants me to do well. For example, she asks me if I want help — sometimes I want it.”
− “Cause they tell us to be quiet in class, they tell us ‘do well’ — like, our science teacher does.”
− “Cause they usually check up on us to see if we’re studying.”
− “If I am naughty they tell me off. [Q. Why is that do you think?] So that I can achieve.”
− “They tell me — ‘cause they say I got a lot of potential and I’m a real good leader.”
− “They always tell me to get to work when I’m in a daydream.”
− “The teachers are always pushing us, and making sure we understand.”

And a number of students stated that a teacher having high expectations of them was part and parcel of being in certain classes — in particular, a streamed ‘high ability’ class:

− “I’m in a streamed class — we are expected to do well, to do better than the average.”
− “Because I’m in the top class for Year 9, so we have a good learning surrounding.”
− “Our class has been put forward to do NCEA. Teachers expect us to study and do well — I just know they do.”

Conversely, there was also an indication, especially among ‘lower achieving’ students, as compared to some students in the ‘top’ streamed classes, that some students believed it was simply part of a teacher’s job description to ‘expect’ students to do well or at least get on with their work, and that this expectation wasn’t necessarily specifically to do with them as an individual.

− “Cause they just expect us to do well, ‘cause they’re our teachers and they’ve been teaching us.”
− “They want us all to achieve, they wouldn’t care enough if they didn’t.”
− “Because we’re supposed to. They expect us to be quiet and do our work.”

And a few students emphasised that they considered that some but not all of their teachers showed that they had high expectations and that they wanted individual students to fulfil those expectations.

− “Can see they way they teach. Some don’t try hard, I can see they don’t care if we are successful. Others try really hard. Our class is a bit naughty. Don’t listen, have to have things repeated seven, eight times. Our science teacher tries so hard to teach us, but they [other students] never listen to her.”
Doing Well in her Studies: Perceptions of Teachers’ Expectations

That the sorts of expectations teachers have can impact in important ways on students’ learning outcomes and self-concept is an ongoing topic of discussion in the education research literature (see, for example, Bishop et al., 200346). To discover what students in the present study could contribute to our understanding of this matter, we asked them in Phases 3 and 4 to consider whether their teachers ‘usually expect you to do well in your studies’.

Explaining in Phase 3 why she felt her teachers did expect her to do well, Emily commented:

“Because they don’t want us to fail, majority of the time. They want to know that they have taught us something. They get a buzz when we do well: that’s what they tell us anyway.”

And in Phase 4, Emily’s response was:

“Yes, because they always make you study. You see their reaction when you fail — they feel they have failed as a teacher.”

In a slightly different context — that is, when asked what helped her ‘learn best’47 — Emily further revealed that her teachers’ opinions of her work were very important to her, and that knowing they had high expectations of her was motivating. She put it like this:

“...if your teacher expects you to learn and you do, you feel proud of yourself.”

Summary Statements about Emily’s Relationships with her Teachers

Despite what were probably largely ‘settling in’ ups and downs in her relationships with some teachers in her first year at secondary school — feeling she was misunderstood, and disliking the frequency with which teachers chastised students, for example — Emily mostly had very positive views about her teachers.

She talked about liking her teachers, especially when they showed they enjoyed and understood teenagers, but she also respected them for the ways in which they helped her to learn. In turn, she was well regarded by the teachers who provided feedback about her.

Emily felt, too, that in general teachers before and after transition were approachable, and very helpful when she requested their help with her work. As well, she considered that they mostly made it clear what they expected from her, especially once she had had time to get to grips with the reality of how different teachers went about things. However Emily also emphasised that at times she would have liked teachers to make learning in class more interesting, relevant and fun, with a particular emphasis on content that was of practical significance, and also personally meaningful. In addition, she wanted teachers to ensure that they clarified work goals and made clear what they expected of students in class — this was particularly the case in Year 9, when she was still adjusting to all that was new or different at secondary school, and when undertaking homework or other assignments.

It appears too that it was very important to Emily that teachers expected her to do well and showed that they believed she would live up to their expectations.

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46 Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Tiakiwai, S., Richardson, C. (2003). Te Kotahitanga: The Experiences of Year 9 and 10 Māori Students in Mainstream Classrooms. Hamilton: University of Waikato. This report can be downloaded from the Education Counts website either via the Ministry of Education website or directly: http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/maori/te-kotahitanga.html

47 Further discussion of Emily’s views on what helped her learn best, or made learning more difficult for her, is contained in Chapter Five.