

WHAT PUPILS TELL US ABOUT TEACHERS AND LESSONS

We know that pupils sometimes switch off in lessons because they are bored, or because they want to avoid work that is difficult, or because they are put off by noise in the classroom, or because they need individual help which the teacher is not able at that moment to give, or because the immediate task is less enthralling than thinking about or chatting about the intricacies of their social lives. These are the familiar day-to-day problems of teaching and learning, but if they are not responded to then pupils may come to accept them as part of the wearisome routinisation of schooling and they may then have difficulty in sustaining a commitment to school and to learning over time.

The strength of such commitment appears to depend on the fine tuning of challenge and engagement in the classroom, the reliability of school-wide frameworks of encouragement, respect and support, and on the potency of the peer group pro- and anti-work norms. And of course on the humanity and professional skill of the teacher.

What makes a good teacher?

In the present judgmental climate teachers are, understandably, anxious lest consulting pupils means unlocking a barrage of personal criticism of their teaching. In our experience this is not the norm: mostly pupils criticise the task or generalises the faults they have identified and their commentaries are often very constructive. (When we are talking to pupils in school settings we use a ground rule that no teacher is to be named - a rule which pupils respect although one got round it by saying, 'There's a certain headteacher in this school who ...'.) We have often been surprised by pupils' capacity for seeing things from the teacher's perspective. For instance, a pupil in McIntyre and Pedder's project (TLRP) explained that their teacher persisted in repeating instructions - a habit which annoyed them - because she wanted to make sure that 'the slower ones' had understood the task; this was a concern they sympathised with but they suggested, eminently sensibly, that she tell them quietly because the whole-class repetition was slowing them down.

What pupils say about good teachers is also sensible; it has the familiar comfort of common sense and this may be why some aspects of their analysis are paid less serious attention in improving learning than they deserve: their familiarity doesn't guarantee that they are carefully monitored at the level of whole school practice.

Our original list is extrapolated from a series of interviews (MYW project, 1991-6) with secondary school pupils in three schools in the north of England. Pupils said they liked:

- * teachers who enjoy teaching the subject
- * teachers who enjoy teaching them
- * teachers who make the lesson interesting and link it to life outside the school
- * teachers who are fair

- * teachers who will have a laugh but who know how to keep order
- * teachers you can talk to
- * teachers who don't go on about things (like how much better other classes are or how much better at their work your older brothers and sisters are)
- * teachers who don't shout
- * teachers who explain things (and who will go through things you don't understand without making you feel small).

When pupils who were not willing learners found the 16+ examinations drawing near two other items emerged:

- * teachers who make you think you can do well
- * teachers who don't give up on you.

As we can see, the qualities that matter to pupils tend to be as much about how they are treated as how they are taught.

At times when pupils are interested in testing out their own power, as individuals and as a group, having a good relationship with teachers can be an important element in their commitment to learning and may also help them to resist the 'school work isn't cool' perspective that often emerges - and flourishes - at such times. A positive discovery in one school (LIN Project) was that the majority of the 19 under-achieving boys consulted through a questionnaire said that they would like more opportunity to talk with teachers about their schoolwork - although they would prefer to do so in ways that would not involve them in losing face in front of their peers; one boy suggested that schools should have 'them wooden things' that are in catholic churches - confessionals - where you could tell a teacher about your problems without your mates seeing you. Indeed, secondary pupils, across projects, tell us that they would like more opportunity to discuss their work, individually, with teachers.

Later projects on pupil consultation, where researchers were asked to talk to pupils about the things that get in the way of their learning and that help them to learn, produced further lists descriptors of good teachers. Although the schools were different, the items were remarkably similar. Reflecting on the data collected by Nick Brown and Lesley Hendy in ten schools in our Learning About Improvement Project in West Sussex, we decided to allocate the items in the original and in the new lists to four broad 'qualities'. Good teachers are:

- * human, accessible and reliable/consistent
- * enthusiastic and positive
- * professionally skilled
- * respectful of students and sensitive to their difficulties in learning

This is what the combined lists look like. In each category the items on the original list are printed in blue, those from the later project in red.

a. Good teachers are human, accessible and reliable/consistent

- they

- * are fair
- * will have a laugh but who know how to keep order
- * are people you can talk to
- * make you think you can do well
- * don 't give up on you
- * are predictable and consistent in their mood
- * are calm and has a sense of humour
- * understand students and treats them 'like an equal'
- * know what it is like to be young and a teenager
- * have common sense
- * are not petty over silly things
- * don't take things personally
- * can admit they have made a mistake

b. Good teachers are enthusiastic and positive - they

- * enjoy teaching the subject
- * enjoy teaching us
- * enjoy teaching
- * give praise more than punishment
- * don't say 'I would rather not be teaching you'

c. Good teachers are professionally skilled -they

- * make the lesson interesting and link it to life outside the school
- * are laid back but know how to keep control
- * are knowledgeable in their subject but knows how to explain
- * vary the way they teach to suit the students in their classes

d. Good teachers are respectful of students and sensitive to their difficulties in learning - they

- * don't go on about things (like how much better other classes are or how much better your older brothers and sisters are)
- * don't shout
- * explain things (and will go through things you don't understand without making you feel small).
- * are not sarcastic or vindictive
- * do not speak to you in an irritating tone of voice
- * don't shout
- * allow some input from the students
- * have respect for students so that they can respect teachers
- * do not assume the student has not listened when help is requested
- * believe students when students tell them something
- * treat students as individuals rather than just one of the mass

Almost 200 of the students from the ten West Sussex schools were selected for interview by their schools as showing some signs of 'disaffection' but, as the local adviser, Chris James, pointed out, 'dissatisfaction' with some aspects of schooling is

often interpreted as 'disaffection' - which is a much deeper and more negative experience and more difficult to deal with, as Klein suggests:

- * 'The young and disaffected take one of four routes in the education system. Either they are pushed out excluded - or they truant persistently, fail their exams or drop out before taking them. Whatever direction they go in, they face a precarious future dogged by stigma, no qualifications and low self-esteem.'
- * (Klein,R. 1999,9; cited by Hendy 2001)

The evidence from the interviews suggested that the students were indeed dissatisfied rather than deeply disaffected: they were disappointed with their progress and by the fact that there were few opportunities to talk about their difficulties in lessons. All, however, had some practical suggestions for improvement and, interestingly, the things that they thought could make a difference are all, as we can see from the items listed above, attainable.

Interestingly, teachers who embody the qualities listed above, it would seem, are not hard to find. Pupils were abstracting the qualities they appreciated from their daily experience of lessons with a variety of clearly excellent and trusted teachers across a range of subjects. For some teachers the discovery of the subtlety and extent of reflection by students on the ways they learn best and the conditions that help to bring them success was a challenge - but, for most, a positive one. The issue was how to extend these 'good' qualities, about which the students were highly perceptive, more widely in their schools.

What makes a good lesson ?

What was striking about pupils' views of the qualities of a good teacher was the consistency of the messages across schools. A similar consistency appears in pupils' linked judgements of what makes a good lesson. Here, as above, we have grouped the items from the various interviews in broad headings. Most pupils respond well to

- * opportunities for participation and engagement
- * active lessons with a variety of learning tasks
- * challenge
- * opportunities to exercise autonomy
- * good working conditions.

These headings are, again, so familiar they don't readily hook into our consciousness and don't therefore get onto our school improvement agenda and we may underestimate their cumulative effect on motivation across different subjects and over time.