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Title: Student perceptions of what makes good teaching.

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Abstract

The Australian Government report Teachers for the 21st Century: Making the Difference (DEST, 2000) highlighted that teachers were central to student learning, and that there was a need for professional development for teachers in order for them to adapt to changing student needs. These ideas are not new and have been have been supported by other reports (DEST, 2003) and other researchers (Darling-Hammond, 2000) over many years and much has been written on the qualities of a good teacher (Center for Teaching Quality 2006, DECS 2005).
This paper reports on a study that examined student's opinions about what they believed helped their learning in the classroom environment and how often they believed that they had experienced this in their classes. The information collected was used with teachers to inform professional development activities and directions. The study was done as a two stage process. Initially focus groups of students were asked open ended questions around the idea of what helped them learn in a classroom environment, including what advice would they give to their teachers and what their teachers did that helped them to learn in class. The responses from these groups were then used to develop a list of teaching aspects, where possible student language was used to describe these aspects. The online questionnaire asked the students how important they considered each aspect in a 5 point likert scale, to select their top five most important aspects and to indicate how often each aspect was evident in their classes in general. Of the twenty one aspects that the students had initially identified two were clearly considered by the majority of students as the most important; teacher explanations and teachers engaging students. Comparisons of the importance and the student's responses to how often they observed it in the classroom will also be discussed. A student leadership group in one school had the opportunity to examine the data and present the results to the staff, their interpretations and explanations of these will also be included.

Introduction

The area of teacher effectiveness has received attention recently both in Australia (DEST, 2000) and overseas (Darling-Hammond, 2007). The Australian Government report Teachers for the 21st Century: Making the Difference (DEST, 2000) highlighted that teachers were central to student learning, and that there was a need for professional development for teachers in order for them to adapt to changing student needs. These ideas are not new and have been have been supported by other reports (DEST, 2003) and other researchers (Darling-Hammond, 2000, Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993) over many years and much has been written on the qualities of a good teacher (Center for Teaching Quality 2006, DECS 2005). Darling-Hammond proposed a number of qualities for effective teachers,

- *"strong general intelligence and verbal ability that help teachers organize and explain ideas, as well as to observe and think diagnostically;*
- *strong content knowledge – up to a threshold level that relates to what is to be taught;*

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- *knowledge of how to teach others in that area (content pedagogy), in particular how to use hands-on learning techniques (e.g. lab work in science and manipulatives in mathematics) and how to develop higher-order thinking skills.*
- *an understanding of learners and their learning and development– including how to assess and scaffold learning, how to support students who have learning differences or difficulties, and how to support the learning of language and content for those who are not already proficient in the language of instruction.*
- *adaptive expertise that allow teachers to make judgments about what is likely to work in a given context in response to students' needs."* (2007)

Wang, Haertel, & Walberg (1993) in their report, which was a synthesis of research, identified 28 categories of what helped students learn and grouped them into 6 broad types of influences. One of the broad types was Classroom Instruction and Climate, which included eight categories including Classroom Management, Student and Teacher Social Interactions, Quality of Instruction, Classroom Climate, Student and Teacher Academic Interactions, Classroom Assessment, Classroom Instruction and Classroom Implementation and Support. Wang, Haertel, & Walberg (1993) also gave each of the 28 categories a relative weighting, with Classroom Management being the highest weighting. Although these categories represent sysntheses of research findings there is also good reason to examine the views of students abourt what helps their learning, because it is these views that are used by students in their everyday learning. Given that students must to a significant degree direct their own learning while in class, they require knowledge that allows effective self-management of their learning.

Students vary widely in knowledge that allows them to exert effective management of their learning (Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996; Kiewra, 2002; Winne, 1987; Winne & Marx, 1982). For example, research by Pressley, Van Etten, Yokoi, Freebern, and Van Meter (1998) demonstrated that students have knowledge of a range of strategies for studying, for coping with distractions and for adjusting to different lecturers' styles and course demands. Luyten, Lowyck and Tuerlinckx (2001) described students' perceptions about learning tasks, finding that these perceptions were significantly associated with students' planned and executed learning activities. Lawson and Askell-Williams, 2001, 2002) have reported on students' knowledge of what helps their learning in general while there have been related analysies of students' knowledge of how class discussions helps their learning (Askell-Williams & Lawson, 2005), and on students' knowledge of how teacher questions can be used to assist both students' learning and teachers' pedagogical practices (Tran & Lawson, 2003).

The purpose of the current study was to examine students' perceptions of what what teachers did that helped them to learn, and then to get a snapshot of how often they believed that these activities were occurring.

Method

This study was part of a project examining Contemporary Learning Environments (with a focus on the use of Learning Technologies) involving four South Australian schools. This paper focuses on one of the schools, which is a large metropolitan high school with students from Years 8 to 12. A two stage process was used to gather the data for this study. Stage 1 consisted of student focus groups that were used to identify the aspects of teaching that students thought helped their learning. The students were asked open-ended questions about what they thought helped their learning; their responses were recorded in written form. In stage 2 the responses from the groups were then collated by the researchers and common themes extracted. These were then turned into statements (Table 1), using the students' language where possible, and incorporated into an online questionnaire where the students were asked to rate each statement in terms of how often they

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believed it was evident in their classes. The students were also asked to nominate what they believed were the five activities that were most important for helping them to learn.

The administration of the questionnaire to all of the students in the school occurred over a one week period late in 2008. A total of 866 students successfully completed the online survey. Classes of students were taken to the computer room and given time to complete the questionnaire. The students were also given an open response question **"**What advice would you give teachers to help them better support your learning?" in order to identify any other aspects that may have been missed through the initial focus groups. The survey data was imported into SPSS for analysis and the open ended responses were examined by the researchers to identify any additional aspects of teaching that the students considered to be important.

Results and Discussion

The statements that were generated by the students matched well with the categories listed by Wang et al (1993) but were more specific and also included aspects of use of ICT's that were not evident in the Wang et al. paper.

1	In general teachers got me interested in the lesson material
2	My teachers encouraged me to achieve
3	Teachers explained things well
4	My teachers told me about ways to remember what we were learning
5	My teachers would check on our understanding of lesson material
6	My teachers would closely look at the ways in which we were learning
7	My teachers' lessons were well organised
8	My teachers would generally try to provide for different student's learning needs
9	My teachers provided useful feedback
10	My teachers would extend me during classes
11	My teachers arranged for student to have some choice in class activity
12	Generally classes were well managed
13	Generally the class environment encouraged me to achieve excellent results
14	Generally I was able to have input to the things I am learning
15	My teachers were passionate and energetic about teaching
16	My teachers used a variety of ways of explaining things
17	My teachers were approachable
18	My teachers talked to me as an individual
19	My teachers implemented learning experiences with ICT that helped me learn
20	My teachers implemented learning experiences that used ICT to specifically cater for different needs of students
21	My teachers supported students to learn for themselves what ICT to use and when to use it

Table 1 Statements developed from the focus groups for online questionnaire

In order to get a measure for which of the aspects that the students considered as being the most important, the number of students in each rating (first to fifth) were given a weighting. The most important statement (first) was weighted as 5 and the fifth as 1. These scores these were then totalled to give a final total score for each of the aspects. The ranks that were obtained were quite robust as a number of teaching. weighting schemes were trialled and the rankings were consistent across these trials. The scheme used was selected for its simplicity. The total number of students that rated each of the aspects was also calculated. Table 2 below shows the aspects of teaching rated by the students from the most important to the least important. There were two aspects that were

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identified by large numbers of the students as helping them to learn. The statement "That teachers explained things well" was rated as most important by 267 students and nearly three quarters of the student population included that statement in their 5 most important statements. The statement "In general teachers got me interested in the lesson material" was rated as most important by 194 students and was included in the top five most important statements by approximately half of the students. There were no significant differences in the rankings between male and female students. The school has a large population of international students (60) and interestingly the results from these students when compared to the local students showed a very similar pattern with three of the top four first preferences being the same and with similar percentages. What is also interesting to note is that students rated the three aspects that involved the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) which is a focus of the larger project, were not highly rated by the students and were ranked as 19, 20 and 21.

No.	Aspect	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth	Total (weighted)	Total students
3	Teachers explained things well	267	184	95	51	36	2494	633
1	In general teachers got me interested in the lesson material	194	82	46	52	50	1590	424
17	My teachers were approachable	40	75	82	91	100	1028	388
2	My teachers encouraged me to achieve	64	92	57	57	48	1021	318
9	My teachers provided useful feedback	17	44	74	78	90	729	303
5	My teachers would check on our understanding of lesson material	36	43	57	46	41	656	223
15	My teachers were passionate and energetic about teaching	41	32	49	49	50	628	221
18	My teachers talked to me as an individual	33	39	47	46	62	616	227
7	My teachers' lessons were well organised	12	48	54	52	40	558	206
11	My teachers arranged for student to have some choice in class activity	43	27	38	38	35	548	181
16	My teachers used a variety of ways of explaining things	11	33	45	48	56	474	193
8	My teachers would generally try to provide for different student's learning needs	30	31	24	25	22	418	132
4	My teachers told me about ways to remember what we were learning	12	36	36	39	20	410	143
12	Generally classes were well managed	11	11	39	39	42	336	142
13	Generally the class environment encouraged me to achieve excellent results	13	21	25	30	44	328	133
14	Generally I was able to have input to the things I am learning	11	18	19	22	43	271	113
10	My teachers would extend me during classes	9	12	23	29	22	242	95
6	My teachers would closely look at the ways in which we were learning	6	14	24	21	12	212	77
19	My teachers implemented	2	7	16	24	20	154	69

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	learning experiences with ICT that helped me learn							
20	My teachers implemented learning experiences that used ICT to specifically cater for different needs of students	4	5	5	11	3	80	28
21	My teachers supported students to learn for themselves what ICT to use and when to use it	2	4	3	9	17	70	35

Table 2 Student rating of aspects of teaching

The students were also asked to rate how often they experienced each of the aspects on a 5 point Likert scale (Never, Some of the time, About half the time, Most of the time, All the time) Where never was rated as 1. Table 3 below shows the aspects of teaching in ranked order according to importance to students and the ranking of how often they are experienced by the students as well as the mean and standard deviation for each aspect.

From Table 3 it can be seen that the most frequently observed aspect was that the teachers were well organised, and that with a mean of 3.66 it indicates that they experienced this more than half of the time. This statement was ranked 10th on what the students thought was most important. The top ranked aspect (That teachers explained things well) had a mean of 3.33 meaning that it was experienced by students a little more than half of the time.

It is interesting to note where there is a disparity between what students consider is important and what is experienced. One such disparity is "That in general teachers got me interested in the lesson materials" which was ranked as second most important by the students but had a mean frequency of 2.96, indicating that it was experienced just less than half the time by the student group. A similar pattern was observed for the statement "That my teachers arranged for student to have some choice in class activity", which was ranked as 9th most important but had a mean frequency of 2.65, which is the second lowest mean frequency reported by the students. Statements with this pattern of results represent aspects of teaching where teachers' practice was not aligned to student expectations.

There were also statements for which the opposite type of disparity was present. One aspect that the students ranked as less important (ranked 14), had the 3rd highest rating for being experienced. experienced was "Generally classes were well managed". Similarly, "That my teachers' lessons were well organised" had the highest mean frequency frequently experienced but was ranked as 10th most important. The fact that for these aspects of teaching practice the teachers were given positive frequency and lower importance reports by the students might reflect the fact that the students in this school were likely to experienced well managed, well organised lessons.

The three aspects which focussed on the use of ICT were also not commonly experienced by the students with all three having means below 3 indicating that it is less than half of the time.

	Teacher Practice or Process	Importance to Students	Experienced By Students		
		Ranking	**Ranking**	**Mean**	SD
3	That teachers explained things well	1	6	3.33	0.85
1	That in general teachers got me interested in the lesson materials	2	14	2.96	0.83
17	That my teachers were approachable	3	2	3.59	1.00

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2	That my teachers encouraged me to achieve	4	4	3.48	1.01
9	That my teachers provided useful feedback	5	6	3.20	0.94
5	That my teachers would check on our understanding of lesson material	6	11	3.07	0.96
15	That my teachers were passionate and energetic about teaching	7	8	3.10	0.99
18	That my teachers talked to me as an individual	8	10	3.09	1.00
11	That my teachers arranged for student to have some choice in class activity	9	20	2.65	0.96
7	That my teachers' lessons were well organised	10	1	3.66	0.82
16	That my teachers used a variety of ways of explaining things	11	7	3.14	0.98
8	That my teachers would generally try to provide for different student's learning needs	12	13	3.03	1.03
4	That my teachers told me about ways to remember what we were learning	13	19	2.75	1.00
12	Generally classes were well managed	14	3	3.56	0.81
13	That generally the class environment encouraged me to achieve excellent results	15	12	3.05	0.98
14	That generally I was able to have input to the things I am learning	16	9	3.09	1.01
10	That my teachers would extend me during classes	17	18	2.75	1.03
6	That my teachers would closely look at the ways in which we were learning	18	17	2.80	1.00
19	That my teachers implemented learning experiences with ICT that helped me learn	19	16	2.81	0.95
20	That my teachers implemented learning experiences that used ICT to specifically cater for different needs of student	20	21	2.61	1.01
21	That my teachers supported students to learn for themselves what ICT to use and when to use it	21	15	2.84	1.01

Table 3 Ranked list of teaching aspects and students rating of how often that they observed this.

The means of each of the ratings were calculated in year groups and these are shown below in Figures 1 -3. It can be seen that from the figures that in most cases the responses are consistent across the year levels. However, for statement_6 (My teachers would closely look at the ways in which we were learning), statement 8 (My teachers would generally try to provide for different student's learning needs) and statement 21 (That my teachers supported students to learn for themselves what ICT to use and when to use it) analysis of mean differences across year levels indicated that there was a trend for students in higher Year levels to give lower frequency ratings

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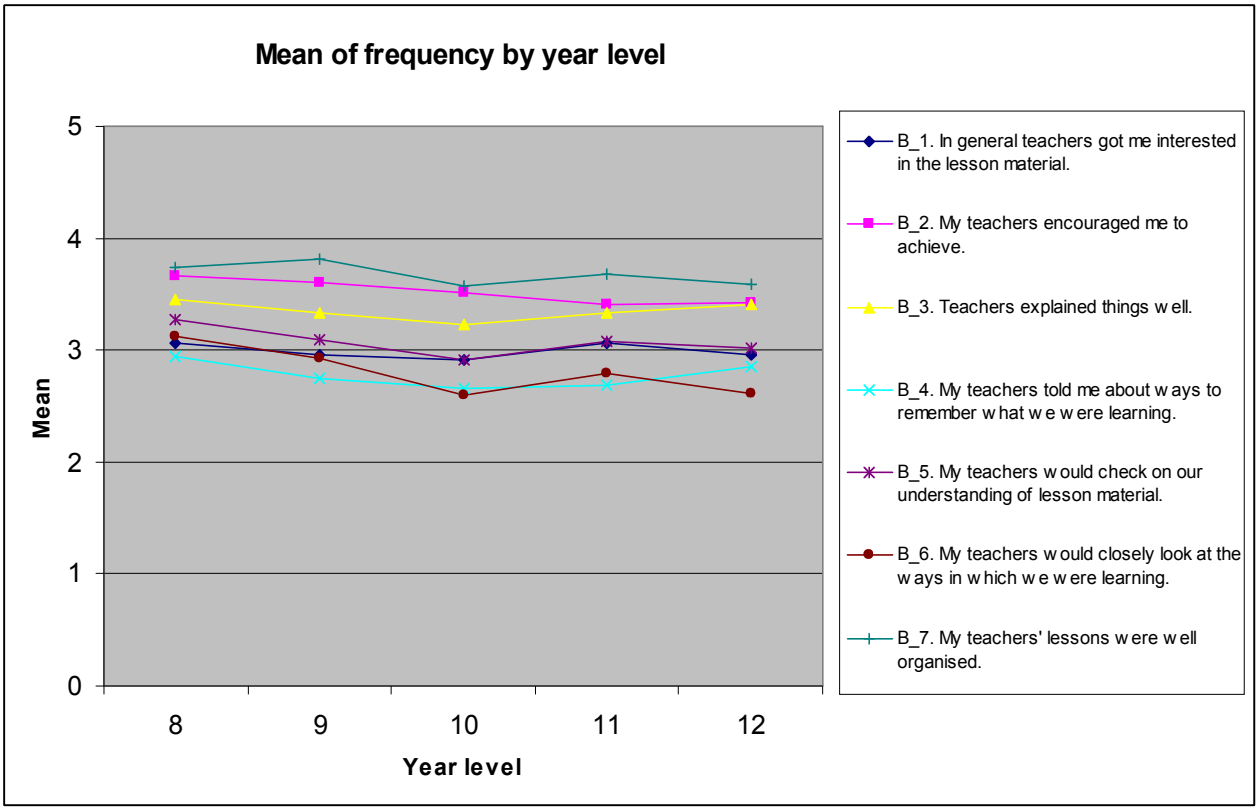

Figure 1 Mean of Frequency by year level for aspects 1-7

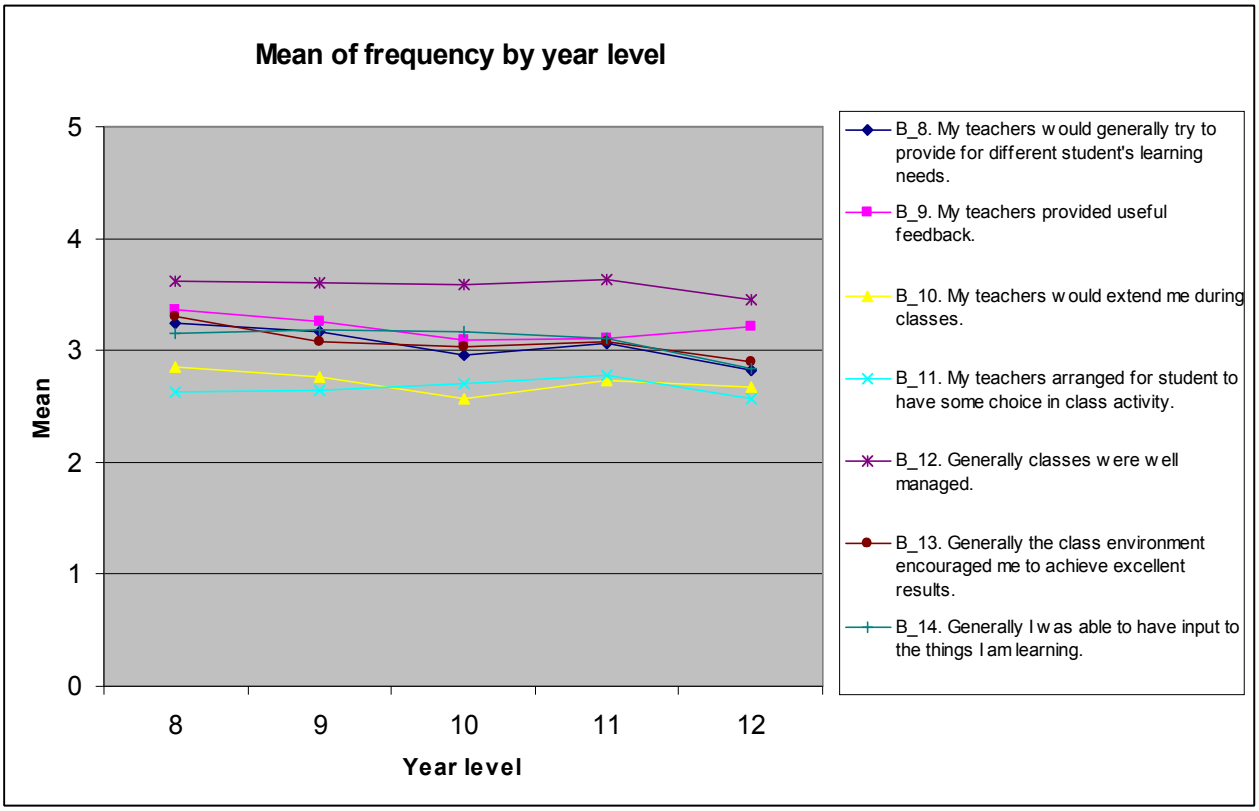

Figure 2 Mean of Frequency by year level for aspects 8-14

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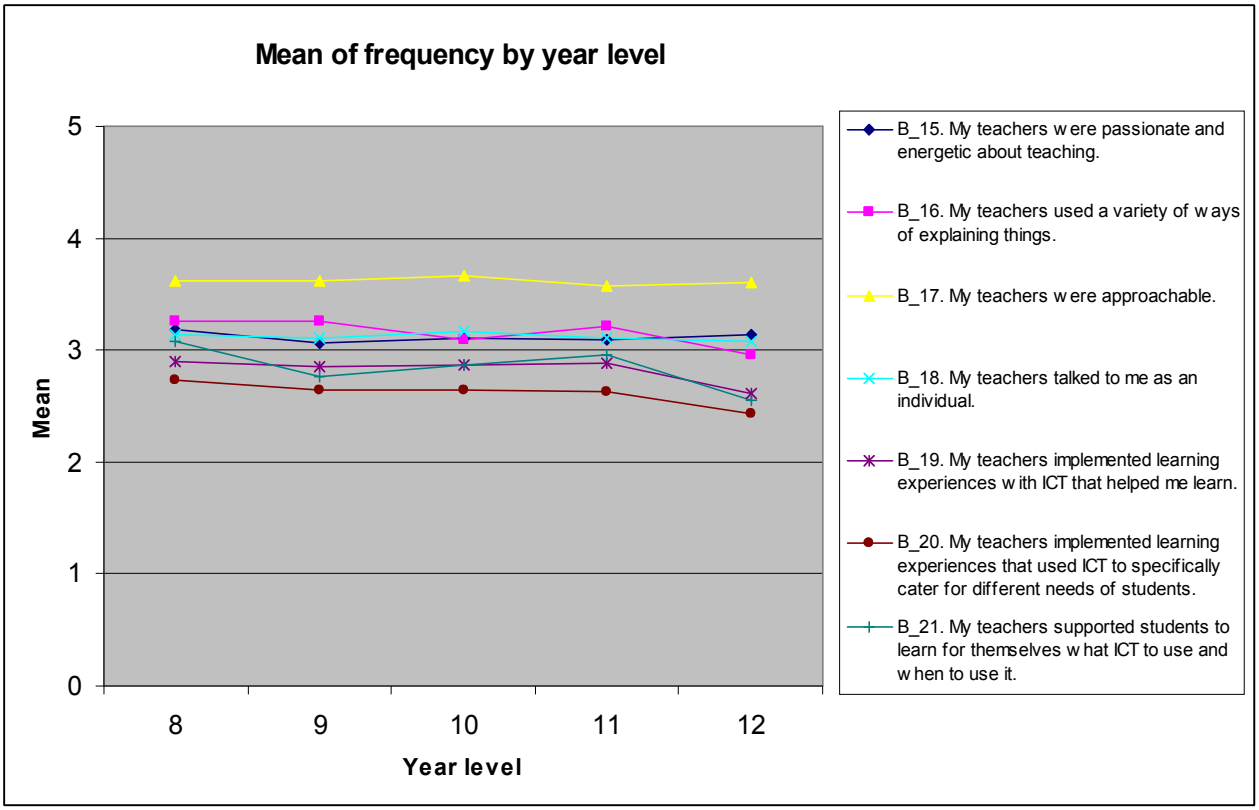

Figure 3 Mean of Frequency by year level for aspects 15-21

Conclusion

Students' understandings of their own learning has been shown to be important for enabling them to direct their own learning. In this study it is clear that students also have detailed understandings about what teachers can do to help student learning. Inspection of the range of 21 statements indicates that these understandings cover aspects of teaching related to motivation, general classroom management, provision for student voice, being explicit about what helps learning and remembering, monitoring of the standard of understanding and the encouragement of achievement of high standards. It is also apparent the use of ICT for teaching and learning is not seen by students as being a major influence on their learning. Teachers use of ICT's has been ranked and rated quite low by the students and given the general perception that this generation of learners expects connected learning using ICT this is clearly an area that warrants further investigation The students perception of how often they experienced the different aspects gives an impression of well organised and managed classes where the teachers are approachable and encouraging. However areas for development appear to be how to develop student engagement with the material and allow for student choice within the class, these are areas that the students consider to be important but not as frequently experienced by the students.

We also see that the initiation of the gathering of data by this school on the broad question of students' views of what helps their teaching provides an important basis for future discussion between teachers and students about critically important aspects of classroom teaching.

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