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## STUDENTS' OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER "PERFORMANCES" IN THE CLASSROOM

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*Abstract: This paper documents students' observations and perceptions of their respective teachers' "performance" within the context of four year nine English classrooms. Drawing upon student interview data – and signalling researcher observations on occasion – it identifies key themes pertaining to the performances of the teachers. Specifically, it addresses the students' perceptions of the qualities or characteristics of their teachers, and the sets of practices employed by the teachers; and the students' views of the types of learning activities with which – and the classroom contexts within which – they were expected to engage. The paper identifies those teacher performances deemed by students to be "effective" and "ineffective" and the constitution of these performances, and draws conclusions as to what we, as educators, might learn from the students with regards to effective teaching practice. Finally, it is noted that while this paper draws specifically upon student observations and perceptions of English teachers' performances, these offer valuable insights for all teachers – teachers of all subjects and across all sectors of education.*

### Introduction

This paper presents students' observations and perceptions of their teachers' "performance" – with the intention of informing educators and their classroom practice. In doing so, it makes use of the term "performance" in a non technical manner; conceptualising it in terms of the types of practices – both of a pedagogical and more personal nature – employed by the teacher. It draws upon data collected from students in four classes – more specifically, four year nine English classes. In detailing the students' observations and perceptions of their teachers' performance, the paper examines a number of key themes to emerge in student interview data. Specifically, these themes pertain to the personal characteristics and professional qualities of their teachers as "teacher" subject per se, as well as the types of learning episodes with which they engaged in the course of "doing" English – that which comes to constitute the performance. And while in this particular case, the performances of four secondary school English teachers have been examined, I suggest that the insights provided by students about what constitutes "effective" and "ineffective" teaching, desirable and undesirable teacher qualities, enjoyable and unenjoyable classroom "learning" experiences, is indeed transferable across the range of teaching disciplines and sectors. To this effect, the students' views offer valuable

insights into how teachers might engage students in the act of learning, construct themselves and operate in ways desirable to students, how they might foster effective classroom contexts, and how they might make the learning process a more enjoyable one for students.

## The Study

This paper was informed by a qualitative multiple case study approach. A State secondary school in a provincial North Queensland city was chosen as the research site – referred to here as Lane Park State High School. Here, four year nine English classes were selected as case study classes. In terms of comparability, it should be noted that all four teachers were working with the same School English Work Program – one informed by the State-endorsed Junior English Syllabus (Department of Education, Queensland, 1994). The selection of the four classes was determined in part by timetabling constraints and by the desirability of sampling male and female teachers, and experienced and less experienced, teachers. The sample, therefore, included two female teachers and two male teachers, of which one female and one male were highly experienced.

The four case study classes chosen are referred to in this paper as classes 9-1, 9-2, 9-3 and 9-4. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that these English classes were considered to be mixed-ability groups and that most students were Caucasian. Figure 1 below details the composition of each class in terms of the number and sex of students, and also indicates the designated teacher. Additionally, it should be noted that given the potential sensitivity of the study, pseudonyms have been allocated to both the students and the teachers in this paper in an effort to ensure their privacy and to preserve their anonymity.

	Grade 9-1	Grade 9-2	Grade 9-3	Grade 9-4
Female Students	11	13	13	7
Male Students	10	11	10	17
Student Total	21	24	23	24
Class Teacher	Mr Brown	Mrs Casey	Mr Jack	Miss Tate

**Figure 1:** Composition of the four case study classes and designated Teacher

Given the complexities of the research site, I employed a range of data collection strategies: field work/observation, interviews, questionnaires, and a review of documents. For the purposes of this paper, use is made of student interviews and, on occasion, my own (researcher) classroom observations as a means of contextualising student interview data. The student interview questions addressed a range of research questions and are provided as Appendices A and B.

Interviews conducted with students, typical of the qualitative frameworks, were of a semi-structured and open-ended nature (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Mason, 1996; Merriam, 1988). I entered the interview situation with an interview guide or schedule – a series of questions – that served as a framework for the interview. These questions were, however, viewed “tentatively,”

and not as “a binding contract” (Glesne, 1999, p. 68). Viewing the questions in this way, I was, as Glesne (1999, p. 68) suggests, “disposed to modify or abandon them, replace them with others, or add new ones to [my] list or *interview schedule*.” This method enabled me to probe and prompt the respondents, to seek clarification and elaboration of their responses, and to improvise and explore pertinent issues as they emerged (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989).

I conducted two interview sessions with the students of the four classes – the first at the completion of the first term, the second at the completion of the semester (i.e., second term). During the first set of interview sessions, conducted in a group format, all students who returned a Parental Permission Letter were interviewed. This initial interview sought to access, in part, the students’ perceptions of their teachers’ performance, the types of activities they were required to undertake as part of doing English, their view of what it ‘meant’ to be a student in their respective classroom, and their view of the dynamics operating within their classrooms (see Appendix A – Student Interview Guidelines I). In structuring the second interview sessions, I selected four groups of students from each class – two groups of girls and two groups of boys. These group interviews again addressed the issues explored in the first interview session, and sought to identify any shifts in student perceptions, and to ascertain why these shifts had occurred (see Appendix B – Student Interview Guidelines II). While these interviews varied in length, they were generally forty to fifty minutes in duration.

The interview sessions were audio taped, transcribed in full, and analysed. In analysing the transcripts, common themes and marked differences pertaining to the notion of “effective’/’ineffective” teaching were identified, categorised and explored. Specifically, transcripts were coded in such a way as to derive identifying ‘markers,’ textual and discursive “markers,” of what came to constitute – from the students’ perspective – a “good” teacher and “good” teaching practice. Such markers included, for example, student reference to egalitarian as opposed to authoritarian teacher positions, student-centred as opposed to teacher-driven practices, equitable as opposed to inequitable teacher practices, fun and active learning episodes and opportunities as opposed to boring and passive ones. These markers, once identified, were reduced to and categorised as themes, and employed as exemplars to substantiate claims made.

## **The Four Teachers**

Four teachers – two male and two female, two experienced and two less experienced – were involved in the study detailed here. As a means of contextualising the students’ observations and perceptions, and providing insight into the teachers themselves, a brief account of the teachers’ professional histories is provided here.

### **Mr Brown and Mrs Casey**

Mr Brown and Mrs Casey were both highly experienced practitioners, with ten years and twelve years classroom teaching experience respectively. Both teachers had also taught across a range of school disciplines. In addition to their classroom teaching experiences, both teachers had held consultancy/advisory positions with the

State Education Department. Mr Brown was appointed Regional Literacy Educational Adviser for a year, while Mrs Casey held the position of Language Consultant for two years. Mrs Casey also worked as a researcher of beginning reading and writing, and as lecturer/tutor at the local university. She held the position of Head of Department (English) at Lane Park State High School at the time of this study – a position she had held for four years. Mr Brown – a new teacher to Lane Park during the year in which this research was undertaken – had also held positions of responsibility including Head of Department (English) and Acting Head of Department (English) for a period of four years and one year respectively. Essentially, given the breadth and diversity of their professional histories, both teachers can be viewed as experienced and knowledgeable practitioners who were well versed in the language of the State syllabus.

### **Mr Jack and Miss Tate**

Compared with their counterparts, Mr Jack and Miss Tate had had limited professional experience. Mr Jack had only four years of teaching experience, all of them at Lane Park. It was solely within this school that he had learnt to be a teacher, and had developed pedagogical relationships with students. Unlike Mr Jack, Miss Tate was a new teacher to Lane Park at the time of the study. Prior to her arrival at Lane Park, she had spent four years teaching in three north Queensland schools. Unlike the other three teachers, History, not English, was her major teaching area. She had, however, some previous experience teaching English, although not at the year nine level. Positioned in this way, Miss Tate expressed her sense of uncertainty about teaching year nine English on several occasions. Her comments included: “I hate teaching English” ... “I never wanted to be an English teacher” ... “I’m not a real English teacher.” Her lack of confidence with English education, and her inexperience with year nine students, seemed to make her anxious about teaching 9-4 English at Lane Park.

### **The Students’ Standpoint: Examining the Data**

Two of the four teachers were viewed by their respective students as being “effective” or “good” teachers, and as engaging in the types of performances seen to be desirable to students. These teachers were Mr Brown and Mrs Casey. In contrast, Mr Jack and Miss Tate were seen by their students – in varying degrees and, at times, for differing reasons – as being “ineffective” and as engaging in performances that were undesirable to students.

Student comments about Mr Brown’s and Mrs Casey’s performances indicated that, in the students’ eyes, both teachers had fulfilled many of the students’ desired expectations of what constitutes a “good” teacher – a “good” English teacher. In contrast, student comments pertaining to Mr Jack’s and Miss Tate’s performances were largely negative and critical; and it became apparent that both these teachers, unlike their counterparts, failed to fulfil many of the students’ expectations of what constitutes a “good” teacher.

## **Students' Observations and Perceptions: Mr Brown as Teacher**

### *Sir, We Like Your Performance*

The students of 9-1 clearly liked the performance of Mr Brown. As highlighted in the following interview transcripts, they viewed favourably his attempts to make English “enjoyable,” and to “make it fun.” They alluded to his active and dramatic approach, and acknowledged his sense of humour. The students perceived his performance to be fair and equitable in terms of his attention distribution and positioning of students. They also identified the student-focused construction of his performance, and saw these practices as being oppositional to, and more desirable than, teacher exposition. The democratic practices he endeavoured to employ in an effort to tap into the interests of the students were also acknowledged. Additionally, he was seen as encouraging and helpful, as well as informed and prepared.

### *Student Interview Transcript*

Connor: He tries to make everything as enjoyable as he can without losing the picture of the activity. His style's pretty good. It's better than a lot of other English teachers I've had. He goes around and talks to everyone, he doesn't just single people out as his favourite, he goes around to everyone ... to see how everyone's going. If someone needs help personally he'll give it to 'em.

Luke: He's laughing and joking and stuff.

Connor: He doesn't generally spend a lot of time giving info[rmation].

...

Luke: ... he already knows what he's gonna be doin' for the lesson.

### *Student Interview Transcript*

Reba: He helps us. It depends on what it is – individual or group.

Venera: He tries to make it fun. Other teachers are like really strict ... we come here and he tries to be funny and jumps around in the classroom.

Justin: He tries to make it fun ... like what everyone wants to do sort of thing. Sometimes, like last term, he asked us what we wanted to do.

Marion: He tries to make it fun; he helps us. He tries to do things that we like, or that he thinks we might like.

... He gives us a little bit of information and then lets us think on our own account instead of telling us everything. He helps us and gives us a bit of encouragement.

### **Mr Brown Does Things Differently**

Mr Brown's “difference” from other teachers emerged in the students' comments about his performance. They suggested that he performed “differently”

from other teachers, and was therefore “interesting.” They viewed him as being different from other teachers in the ways in which he constructed English as a subject, and in terms of the ways in which he viewed and positioned them as students. As Connor stated: “Other teachers are like sick of kids, and a bit bored of English, doin’ it.” In contrast, the students claimed that Mr Brown “really enjoyed” teaching English, and that his enjoyment was evident in his performed practices. Connor also suggested that, “he’s pretty enthusiastic about it, he must like it, in the way that he teaches it ... the way he gets into teaching it.” The students also claimed that Mr Brown’s approach to the subject English, and his positioning of them as students, had a positive impact upon them and their willingness to participate and engage in the subject. As Luke suggested, “If the teacher’s interested, the kids are gonna be interested ... if you enjoy it you listen more, you don’t muck around.”

Drawing upon discourses pertaining to equity, the students stated that Mr Brown treated “everyone equally really,” and that he made every member of the class feel “comfortable,” while also respecting the opinions of all students. As John suggested, “He gets on with everyone.” Marion commented on feeling comfortable, suggesting that “he made us feel like part of the class.” Similarly, John – the most marginalised by other students in the class – claimed that Mr Brown made him “feel kinda welcome in the class.”

The students also identified the active and interactive aspects of his performance as both desirable and different from that of other teachers. As Sam claimed:

When you see him, he’s always walkin’ around talkin’ to people. You just need to look at him. A different teacher who didn’t like it would just sit at their desk, just write work up on the board and sit down again, tell everyone to shut up and get on with their work.

Similarly, Connor stated that “instead of just coming and sitting at his desk ... he comes around and helps us all the time, and natters away with people.”

Mr Brown’s ability to position the students comfortably, and to value them as class members, was linked, in part, to his management practices. Again, the students regarded these practices as effective, and read them as different from those of other teachers. Mr Brown could “handle the class,” but was “not strict.” Being “strict” was viewed by the students as normal teaching practice, and in this way, Mr Brown was positioned and perceived differently. His performed management practices were regarded as being proactive, and as providing a space for the students to take up the positions of good student and the worker. As Evan claimed, “If he sees a problem coming, I think he stops it straight away, so it doesn’t get any worse.” They believed his management was effective because, as Connor suggested, “You get a lot more time to work.” Connor elaborated upon this notion, stating:

I like this class better than some other classes where people constantly stop, hold up the lesson because they just muck up too much, where this class has hardly ever been held up. It’s part the teacher, with the work he’s handing out, it’s just the way the teacher handles the class.

Connor’s comment also signals the complexities and interconnectedness of “effective” teaching. Effective teachers not only control the class, but also engage the students in interesting work.

The units of work Mr Brown prepared for the class were again judged to be different and therefore interesting. In many ways, his ability to construct English units in these ways was due to his capacity to access and draw from an extensive repertoire of possible practices. His ability to ‘read,’ or view, Subject English differently and to play with the work program informing the subject provided him

with the space to “do” English differently. This ability was evident in my observations, as researcher, of both his classroom practice and his planning for the subject. He had, as the students suggested, “heaps of ideas.” It became evident in the students’ comments about the units of work that Mr Brown had successfully tapped into their interests. Commenting on one of the units of work, John claimed that “it’s something that most grade niners might enjoy.” Of this unit, Luke also stated: “It’s interesting, a lot different to what we normally do.” Similar comments were made about other units including: “[it’s] not about the same old boring stuff,” “[it’s] about something that everyone can like.”

### **Mr Brown: An Effective Practitioner**

There was consensus among the students that Mr Brown was an effective English teacher. They regarded his performance to be different from that of other teachers, and in this way, desirable. They regarded him as an enthusiastic, active and dramatic performer, who made the experience of doing English an enjoyable one. His student-focused practices and interactive performance were viewed favourably by the students. He was seen as equitable, and as one who successfully tapped into – as was his desire stated in interview – the students’ interests. Essentially, his performance and subsequent construction of English as a subject, along with the subject positions made available to students through such practice, were judged favourably by the students.

### **Students’ Observations and Perceptions: Mrs Casey as Teacher**

#### **Her Enthusiasm is Contagious**

The key descriptors used by the students in detailing Mrs Casey’s performance pertained to her “enthusiasm” and “enjoyment” of teaching. As evident in the following interview transcript, they perceived her performance to be “contagious.”

Alisa: It seems like she’s trying to get the class into it by making it a little bit more exciting. Just trying to make people, sort of enthusiastic about it.

Leanne: If you’ve got a teacher who’s enthusiastic about it, then it starts to show in the kids and they get more enthusiastic about tasks and that.

Amber: And if the teacher’s happy, it’s sort of like contagious. All the kids sort of catch on, the whole class is happy then.

Agatha: Her enjoyment shows on us, and we sort of like, pick up on it.

There was unanimous agreement among the students that Mrs Casey “really, really enjoy[ed]” and “love[d]” teaching English. They suggested that her enjoyment was evident in her performance, and claimed that, “she’s so enthusiastic about everything we do,” and that she “tries to make it fun, enjoyable.” Others suggested that “she doesn’t get crabby,” that “she does a lot for us,” that “she’s always encouraging us,” that she “makes us do our best,” and that “she seems like she’s got time for kids all the time.” Additionally, the students identified specific features of her embodied performance as evidence of her enjoyment. They claimed that “her eyes light up,” “she laughs,” and that “she always has a smile on her face.”



*She's Different, Effective and We Like Her Performance*

The students viewed Mrs Casey's performance to be "different" from that of other teachers and highly effective. They suggested that this difference lay in the types of "fun" tasks that she implemented, as well as the "choices" she offered them. Their observations of Mrs Casey's pedagogical practice illuminated the ways in which she operated within student-focused paradigms. A group of boys interviewed explained it in the following way:

John: She's a different one [i.e., teacher] to most of 'em. She gives you choice an' stuff.

David: She makes class work fun.

Mark: She doesn't do all boring stuff ... she makes it fun, like an activity or a game.

David: Exciting work.

Clearly, these views of Mrs Casey's "different" and "effective" practice are comparable to those held by the 9-1 students of Mr Brown's practice. The students also linked this notion of difference to her practice of oral- and group-based student-centred learning, as opposed to teacher exposition and teacher-driven practices. Furthermore, they suggested that her "interest" in, and involvement with students, marked her as different from, and "better" than, other teachers. They suggested:

Katrina: She's better than most teachers. She always comes to people who need help ... she takes an interest in what we've gotta do.

Alisa: She tends to mainly do discussions to get people involved.

Katrina: And she sets people off in other groups.

Sam: She doesn't write everything up on the board and say, "Copy this."

She gets involved in it and helps us.

Similarly, other students commented:

Emma: She cares about everyone I think.

...

Helen: Like she understands you.

Emma: She wants to get to know you.

Kate: We're like a big family our class.

Kate's comment here is a testament to the types of relationships, and the sense of equity and respect, that Mrs Casey was able to foster in the classroom through her performance – the positions that she took up herself, as well as those which she provided for the students.

The students also regarded the positions made available to them by Mrs Casey as being different from those provided by other teachers. The students suggested that she treated them "like adults," and "not like little kids like most other teachers do." The notions of treating all students equally, and of not putting the students "down," were prevalent features of their comments about Mrs Casey's performance. So, too, was the notion of her positive reinforcement of student behaviour and work. As Helen explained, "Mrs Casey sort of congratulates you, so you feel proud of what you do, like, 'This is really good Helen.'"

### *Mrs Casey as Classroom Manager*

There was again unanimous agreement among the students that Mrs Casey was a very effective classroom manager, and they suggested that this affected the amount of work that they produced. As Robert stated: "She's strict and nobody mucks up. It makes you do more work." Alisa also suggested that because Mrs Casey could effectively manage student behaviour, there were fewer interruptions to their learning, and that they "seem[ed] to learn more." The students were also aware of the subtle forms of control Mrs Casey used. As Jennifer explained, "She hardly ever yells, but she *just* controls us." Additionally, Mrs Casey was viewed as only employing disciplinary technologies "when she need[ed] to," and that these were effective because "she really got through to" students. Once again, the students' views of Mrs Casey's performance as a classroom manager are comparable to those of Mr Brown as held by the students in 9-1. Similar too, are the links made by the students in regard to the amount of work undertaken and produced as being commensurate with the teacher's ability to effectively control and manage the classroom site.

### *She's a Very Good Teacher*

The students of 9-2 agreed, once again unanimously, that Mrs Casey was indeed a "good" teacher. She was seen to be the nurturing, yet businesslike, teacher subject, and as providing the students with positions which they deemed as favourable. She constructed English as a student-centred and enjoyable subject. Essentially, to be a student of Subject English within Mrs Casey's classroom was a fulfilling and rewarding experience.

## **The "Effective" Teachers in Review**

Several common themes emerged in the students' perceptions of Mr Brown's and Mrs Casey's performances and subsequent 'doing' of Subject English. Most significantly, both teachers were viewed as being "different" from other teachers: they were considered "encouraging," "enthusiastic," "fair" and "helpful." The students also suggested that Mr Brown and Mrs Casey endeavoured to make the work – and thus the subject – "fun" and "enjoyable" by tapping into their interests and "likes." Both teachers were seen as "enjoying" their role as teachers, as English teachers. Furthermore, both teachers were perceived by their students to be effective classroom managers. The students' observations of Mr Brown and Mrs Casey's performances aligned the teachers with student-focused discourses or paradigms of practice. However, the students also very clearly recognised the capacity of these teachers to activate more teacher-focused discourses when necessary, and to move fluidly across a range of possible practices.

## **Students' Observations and Perceptions: Mr Jack as Teacher**

### *Term One, and All Seems Well*

During term one, there was a positive feeling among the majority of students about both the subject and Mr Jack. The students expressed their enjoyment of English and their view that Mr Jack was a "good teacher." They felt comfortable

within the context of the classroom site, and viewed the positions offered to them by Mr Jack as desirable.

Jessica: No other English teacher I've had is like him.

Linda: It makes you look forward to going to English.

Belinda, Linda, Jessica (in unison): Yeah.

Jessica: It's relaxing.

...

Gavin: There's no pressure. You don't have to keep your head down; there's a bit of freedom.

Mr Jack was seen as being "different" from other teachers because he was "helpful" and "enthusiastic." In outlining the key features of his performance, the students suggested that he was "down to earth and kind-hearted" and "very understanding." They stated that Mr Jack, unlike "a lot of other teachers," did not put them "down"; but rather that he was "encouraging." They viewed his performance to be involved and active, and suggested that he took an interest in them as individuals. In these ways, his performance was regarded in ways – favourable ways – as similar to that of Mr Brown and Mrs Casey. Commenting on his performance, the students stated:

Alison: I like how he doesn't just stand up and talk to the class. He comes around to everyone.

...

Craig: He goes around helping people, trying to give them the incentive to do it [i.e., the work].

Tom: He sits down and explains it.

Geoffrey: He listens to you and offers you advice.

Craig: He pushes you, but he doesn't tell you to do it. He pushes you like a friend.

Similarly again to the students' perceptions of Mr Brown's and Mrs Casey's performance, Mr Jack's students suggested that "he goes out of his way" to make English enjoyable. Picking up on this notion, and alluding to Mr Jack's pedagogy, Leon explained:

I think, he goes out of his way more than other teachers do, um, to make the kids happy and what, what work they're doing.

... Mr Jack actually, varies, makes us in various ways, you know, his way of doing it.

They believed that he endeavoured to "set good things for [them] to do," that he "put a lot into it," and that "he always want[ed] to do something different." Essentially, their perceptions reflected Mr Jack's engagement with student-focused practice – practice he stated to find desirable and had planned to employ.

### **Term Two, and How Things Have Changed**

Jessica: It never used to be like this, like at the start of the year, you have to admit that. It wasn't like that, but now look at it.

There was general consensus among the students interviewed at the conclusion of the semester that things had changed in terms of the learning opportunities with which they were provided and with the practices that had come to constitute the work, and doing, of Subject English. While Mr Jack had constructed English in "various ways," and had "good" and "different things" for them to do during term one, the

students believed that this was not the case in term two. Rather, they suggested that the work had become “repetitive” and “pretty boring.” They also commented that “everything” they did in term two took place within a “group” learning context. Several of the students also made similar comments to Alison, who stated that she “hadn’t really learnt that much this [i.e., second] term.”

Mr Jack’s performance as a classroom manager also came under significant student scrutiny at the end of the semester. While they were initially empathetic and acknowledged the difficulties confronting Mr Jack within the context of the classroom – specifically the disruptive (mis)behaviours of three boys (Matthew, Daniel and Jerry) – there was a significant shift in their attitude by the end of the semester. The following student interview transcripts signal the shifts in the students’ perceptions of Mr Jack’s performance, and more specifically his performance as a classroom manager.

*Student Interview Transcript: The Girls’ Speak*

Jessica: He still spends all of the time with the people who don’t even want it [i.e., Daniel, Matthew and Jerry]. They’re not even interested, but they get it anyway. When he gets up them ... they get worse.

Linda: They think it’s good ‘cause he got up them, and they think they’re really big ‘cause they got in trouble and they just keep on going.

Jessica: ... Like you need the help, but he’s always with the other guys.

Alison: He’s usually always with Daniel and Jerry all the time.

... He says, “Wait ‘til I’ve finished with this group,” and he’s never finished with ‘em.

Jessica: Mr Jack used to be like really fair. He used to spend time evenly with everybody, but now he has to spend more time with them.

... I think if those other people – Matthew, Daniel and Jerry – weren’t in the class, maybe the whole class would be a bit happier.

Linda: Maybe if Matthew and Jerry had a teacher who could handle them, like Mr Jack is too soft to handle them.

Tiffany: I think he should be more harder on the people who don’t work. They get him in that mood ... like we’re being punished as well.

*Student Interview Transcript: The Boys’ Speak*

William [referring to Mr Jack]: He’s a woose.

Craig: He can’t handle Matthew.

Tom: No, I don’t reckon Mr Jack can’t handle him. I don’t know why he lets him get away with it.

Leon: Maybe he thinks that Matthew’s only looking for attention, so when he gets it he’ll settle down.

Tom: Maybe he thinks sending him to the office all the time is no help to him either.

Leon: ‘Cause he was talking about it, saying “What’s sending him to the office gonna do?”

He keeps saying that.

(The boys all agree that their readings of Mr Jack have changed over the course of the semester).

Craig: It's sort of Mr Jack's fault. He lets 'em [i.e., Daniel, Matthew and Jerry] go too far ...

Tom: He's changed since the start of the year, he's getting a bit tempered now.

...

Leon: He's a bit of a tried hard. Not being mean or anything, but if he's getting' up someone, he sort of like tries to make it into a joke, to get out of it or somethin'.

... He gets angry with 'em, but he doesn't really do anything.

Craig: ... trynna put on a front.

Leon: He's full of ultimatums.

...

Craig: I reckon he's scared of Matthew.

Leon: Yeah, he does look like it 'ey. Like he's scared of him ... he looks intimidated.

...

William: He's alright, but I thought he'd be a better teacher that's all.

Tom: I thought he was gonna be a better teacher than he was, I thought he'd be more (pause) somethin'.

The students came to view Mr Jack's performance as a classroom manager as inadequate and ineffective. His inability to manage and modify the performances of the three disruptive and misbehaving boys – Matthew, Daniel and Jerry – was acknowledged and judged to be problematic, as it denied good students access to his attention and assistance. The good students came – as Mr Jack himself suggested – to resent this.

### **We Thought He'd be a Better Teacher'**

In summation, while the students' initial perceptions of Mr Jack's performance were favourable a significant shift occurred during the course of the semester, resulting in more critical final viewpoints. Initially perceived to be a "good" teacher who practised "different" and "interesting" ways of doing English, he came to be seen as a teacher who could not manage the classroom site, and who offered "repetitive" and "boring" learning experiences. The students came to view his performance as inadequate, and as failing to provide them with desirable ways of being English students. The majority of the students came to feel disenfranchised – silenced and made invisible by his inability to modify the performances of the three disruptive and misbehaving boys. By the conclusion of the semester, there was a sense of dissatisfaction and disappointment among the students. Tiffany encapsulated their perception, suggesting: "I thought he'd be a better teacher."

## **Students' Observations and Perceptions: Miss Tate as Teacher**

### *She Does Not Enjoy Teaching Us*

The students of 9-4 believed that Miss Tate did not enjoy teaching their class – that there was “no chance” she would. They also acknowledged the highly embodied nature of her performance. They suggested that her lack of enjoyment was visible, and claimed that “you can just tell by the expression on her face.” The students also made reference to the ways in which she “looks like she’s getting frustrated,” and “sits down at her desk sometimes and does nothing.” Unlike the other three teachers who smiled, laughed and joked, Miss Tate “frowned” and was perceived to be “always cranky.”

### **She’s a Strict Teacher, but ...**

The students described Miss Tate as a “strict” teacher who was “always yelling.” As Scott explained: “She’s always yelling. She’s always strict. She won’t let you get away with just the simplest little thing ... You can joke around with other teachers, but like with Miss, you can’t really joke around.” Her performance, as Nathan – and many others – suggested, was driven by her desire for “control.” She was clearly viewed as a teacher who desired to be the foci of control. While the students saw her in this way, they nonetheless viewed her classroom management as ineffective in dealing with the attention seeking (mis)behaviours exhibited by many of the boys in 9-4. As Graham suggested: “She should be stricter on Nathan, Jonathon, or anyone who plays up. Send ‘em to the office or somethin’. She just puts ‘em outside and that doesn’t really do nothin,’ ‘cause then they just do it again and again.”

### **What We get to do Depends on Her Mood**

There was agreement among the students that what they got to “do” in English was largely dependent upon the type of “mood” Miss Tate was in on any given day. They explained this issue in the following way:

Graham: If she’s in a good mood she lets you do decent things, like, when she’s in a bad mood she’ll make you sit there and be quiet. In a good mood, she let’s you do things in groups.

Steven: And she’s not as strict with the rules and that.

Corey: If like she’s in a bad mood, she comes and says, “Sit down; do your work and don’t talk ... work by yourselves.”

Doing English, as evident in the students’ comments, often came to be a silent, isolated and individualised experience. The subject also was seen to focus upon “writing” as work. As Christine suggested, “we don’t get to do that much speaking ... we usually do a fair bit of writing.” Similarly, Deanne stated that “most of the time she’s saying to us, ‘No talking, do your work’.” While the students viewed group work as desirable, it was a learning context that was largely denied them by Miss Tate. Describing Miss Tate’s practice, Samantha stated that “she usually does whole class or individual work,” and that it “gets boring.” The students’ observations indicate that the pedagogical practices employed by Miss Tate were firmly located within teacher-focused paradigms, and that they felt positioned and required to function as silent and passive workers.

### Getting Attention: Conflicting Views Along Gendered Lines

The students' opinions regarding Miss Tate's distribution of attention were demarcated along gendered lines – the girls and boys taking up different and often conflicting positions. The girls claimed, and I concur in light of my observations of this class, that the boys received the lion's share of Miss Tate's attention. The boys, however, claimed that it was the girls who received more of the teacher's attention. The girls' observations of the classroom context, the operant dynamics, and the teacher's performance, signal their view that the attention seeking (mis)behaviours of the boys successfully monopolised the teacher's time. While the girls acknowledged Miss Tate's attempts to be "fair," they were aware of the inequities operating within the site, and expressed their view that such interactions were indeed unfair, annoying and detrimental to their learning. The girls claimed, in interview, that:

Christine: She's pretty fair, but sometimes she gets tied up with all the rest of them, like people who misbehave and everything. So she can't really get to the others 'cause she had to deal with them [i.e., the misbehaving students] first.

Samantha: She's always with them. If they're naughty she goes over to 'em and starts talking to 'em, or helping 'em to settle and everything.

Christine: And like she's always with them.

...

Kate: It's not really fair.

Deanne: Yeah, you get annoyed.

Christine: You can't get your work done.

Samantha: And when you do get help from her, it's like she's there for two minutes and the boys muck up, so she's gotta go over there [i.e., to the misbehaving boys], and she ends up helping them and never comes back.

This perception that the boys who engaged in attention seeking (mis)behaviours were rewarded with Miss Tate's attention was also endorsed by many of the male students. They identified the "three main offenders" – Nathan, Sam and Jonathon – and suggested that "they get their fair share and that, they get a lot of attention from her by being bad." While they acknowledged this particular dynamic, they nonetheless maintained the view that it was the girls who received most of the teacher's attention. The boys claimed that:

Graham: Mainly the girls get the attention.

Hayden: Yeah.

...

Graham: They don't hog it themselves, she [i.e., Miss Tate] does it.

They don't ask for it, she just does it, you know.

Steven: They don't ask for it, but they always get it. I think you'd find that with most teachers.

My position, as an observer of the classroom context and of Miss Tate's performance, sits in opposition to that of the boys. The girls did not receive most of Miss Tate's attention. However, the girls did receive the majority of her "positive" attention, and I suggest that it is this that the boys are alluding to. While the boys received the majority of her attention, it most often took a "negative" form. The boys' position stems from their view that Miss Tate held an affinity for the girls, that she "led towards the females," and that while "she does like [the boys] ... she doesn't

respect [them] like the girls.” In addition, they suggested that Miss Tate “favours the girls.” It was from this position, I suggest, that the boys have judged – however “inaccurately” – Miss Tate’s distribution of attention time within the classroom site. Finally, and similarly to Mr Jack, Miss Tate’s inability to manage the classroom and the dynamics operating within it – particularly the (mis)behaviours of the boys – is linked to the ways in which the students, particularly the girls, came to view her distribution of time and attention.

### **The “Ineffective” Teachers in Review**

The most salient feature to emerge in the students’ perceptions of Mr Jack and Miss Tate pertained to their performances as classroom managers. Mr Jack’s unwillingness to take up an authoritative position was seen to be problematic. He was viewed as being unable to modify the (mis)behaviours of particular boys – to the detriment of the other students and their endeavours to engage in learning. Miss Tate, despite taking up an authoritative and strict position, was also seen as being unable to contain the performances of the disruptive boys in 9-4. While their performances were different, both teachers were regarded as ineffective classroom operators. Another feature to emerge in the students’ observations pertained to the tasks and activities set by these two teachers. These were essentially viewed as “boring.” Finally, as evident in the students’ largely negative and critical comments, it became apparent that these two teachers – unlike their ‘effective’ counterparts – failed to fulfil the student’s expectations and desires.

### **Implications of This Study: What can We Learn?**

As stated at the outset, it is envisaged that the presentation here of students’ observations and perceptions of four teachers’ performances, may serve to inform teach-er/ing practice within and across all educational contexts in some way – to provide insights into how it is that students view and regard what they see performed before them in the classroom and the ways in which particular teacher performances serve to position them as students and indeed as learners. While I would suggest that these insights are not new or, I suspect, surprising, they might serve nonetheless as a valuable ‘reminder’ of what constitutes – in the eyes of students – “good” teacher practice. With this in mind, what might we learn from the students’ observations and perceptions as presented here?

Firstly, students pick up on and read particular embodied actions or visual clues as apparent in their teacher’s performance. For example, teachers who smile, laugh, have a sense of humour, are active, enthusiastic, dramatic and who are seen to enjoy what they do are viewed favourably by students. In contrast, those who frown, are always cranky, get frustrated, always yell, sit inactively at the desk, and who indicate a visible lack of enjoyment of teaching by “the expression on [their] face” are viewed in a negative light.

Students judge other particular qualities or characteristics that come to constitute the performance of ‘teacher’ subject favourably. These qualities include: treating the students like adults; not putting them down; showing a genuine interest in the students as individuals; fostering relationships of equity and respect with and



between students; being fair and helpful; and caring about, understanding and encouraging students.

Similar themes emerge when examining the students' observations and perceptions of the teaching and learning process specifically. Students look favourably upon being engaged in enjoyable, fun and active learning episodes. In terms of particular teach-er/ing practice, they regard highly teachers who can foster a comfortable learning environment, who position students equally without displays of favouritism, and who demonstrate the capacity to fairly and equitably distribute their time and attention to students in the class. Also well regarded are teachers who engage in democratic practices – those who inquire into students' interests and provide them with "choice."

Additionally, teachers who engage in an active and interactive role in the classroom are highly regarded. These teachers are those who instigate a task, move around the classroom, converse with and help students. In contrast, those teachers who write information on the board for students to copy, sit at their desk and do "nothing" are seen to be ineffective and their performance undesirable to students.

Teachers who engage in student-focused practices are, in contrast to those who operate within a teacher-centred paradigm and engage largely in teacher exposition, seen to be effective operators by students. These teachers engage students in active and group work tasks, activities of student choice, and discussions. In contrast, teachers employing teacher-driven – and undesirable – practice offer their students little to no choice; little variety, but rather boring, repetitive work; and position them as solitary, silent and passive workers.

Effective teachers are – as regarded by students – effective classroom managers. These teachers are proactive in their approach to classroom management. They deal with inappropriate student behaviour before it becomes an issue. While strict, they do not yell, but rather *just* control the performances of the students in the class. They positively reinforce appropriate student behaviour. In contrast, ineffective classroom managers yell ineffectually, are not strict enough to modify inappropriate student behaviours – take a "too soft[ly]," "woose[y]" approach, and are seen as being unable to handle problematic students. Furthermore, students view their teachers' ability/inability to effectively manage the classroom site as bearing direct impact on their learning and other experiences within the class. In particular, in those classrooms that are well managed, the students suggest that they have "more time to work" and that they get "more work done." In contrast, those students whose teachers are seen to be ineffectual managers, suggest that this proves detrimental to their learning and, specifically, that they receive little to no help with their work, or attention from, their teacher. Clearly, to be viewed as an effective teacher, one must master the often difficult task of managing the classroom context effectively.

Finally, effective teachers are teachers who are knowledgeable, well informed in terms of their subject matter and the lessons they are teaching, and well prepared. Significantly, they are teachers who demonstrate the capacity to access and draw from an extensive repertoire of possible practices – that is, they have "heaps of ideas" from which to call upon and employ at various times as appropriate to the learning needs of their students.

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## Appendix A: Student Interview Guidelines I

What sort of activities/tasks have you done in English so far this year?  
Which did you enjoy – why? Which did you not enjoy doing – why?  
Which were interesting? Which were not interesting – why/why not?  
How do you think your teacher feels about teaching English?  
Do you think this affects how you feel about English? Why/ in what ways?  
Do you think your teacher enjoys teaching your particular class? How can you tell?  
What does she/he do to show this?  
Are there any particular students that you see as causing your teacher a problem?  
What sorts of things do these students do/or not do which cause problems?  
How do you feel as a member of this class?  
Do you feel that your teacher values you, your opinions?  
Are there any students in your class who you feel may not enjoy being a member of this class? Why? How are they treated by the students/by the teacher?  
Are there students in this class who you think would not feel free to give their opinions/answer questions aloud in this class? Why do you think this is so?  
Do you think that your teacher pays equal attention to all of the students in your class?  
How do you feel about this?  
[Discussion of gender dynamics to be followed here]  
Do you think that there are any groups of kids in your class who are particularly demanding of your teacher – who seek your teacher's attention/time?  
How do they try to get this attention? What do they do/how do they behave?  
What would you do differently in the classroom if you were the teacher?  
How can your teacher make changes that would make you feel more comfortable in the classroom? Enjoy English more?  
What do you hope to achieve in English this year? Do you think that English is an important subject to do well in? Do you think it is a relevant subject? Do you think that what you learn in English will help you later in life?

## **Appendix B: Student Interview Guidelines II**

Since our last discussion, what activities/tasks have you done in English?  
Which did you enjoy/dislike? Why/why not?  
Do you think they were worthwhile/useful learning activities? What did you learn from them? What do you think your teacher wanted you to learn from them? Why do you think your teacher had you do these activities?  
How could they have been more successful/enjoyable/worthwhile?  
You have studied a novel. What did you think of this novel and why?  
What did you think of the way your teacher taught the novel, the kinds of activities you did?  
Did you work mainly in groups or individually? How did you feel about this?  
Why did you like/dislike the novel unit – was it the novel itself, the activities you did?  
Do you think the novel unit was successful – why/why not?  
What would you have done differently if you were the teacher?  
I think you would be aware of how different teachers teach differently, have different teaching styles. How would you describe to others your teacher's style?  
What could they expect?  
How does your teacher "do" English? What does your teacher get you to do in English?  
What are some of the things you like/dislike about your teacher's style?  
Do you consider your teacher to be a "good"/effective teacher – why/why not?  
What would you do differently if you were the teacher? What advice would you give your teacher?  
Do you remember how you felt about being in this class at the start of the year?  
Has your opinion changed? What has happened to change your opinion?  
How does your teacher make you feel as a member of this class?  
Do you think your teacher respects you and your opinions? Why/why not?  
What changes would you suggest your teacher make in order to make you feel more comfortable in the classroom?  
What do you think of the assessment tasks you've been set – written and oral?  
What do you think of your teacher's feedback on these pieces?  
If you were to describe what English is, based on your experiences this semester, what would you say? What would you say you "do" in English? What does it mean to "do" English in your class?  
With the possibility of changes in classes, how do you feel?