

Bolton Data for Inclusion

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Title :

What Children Say About School

Abstract :

This data resulted from a survey of 500 primary and secondary schools in one Local Education Authority in the North West of England. 2,527 children responded to four questions asking what made them happy and unhappy at school and what they thought made a good and bad teacher. What children think is important about school, such as friendships and helpful teachers, is far removed from the current educational agenda focussing on testing, league tables and standardisation. If we want an effective schooling system we must begin to hear and value what children have to say.

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Summary

What Children Say About School

August 1998

This is a study of the views expressed by **2,527 pupils** in response to **four open-ended questions**. The pupils were from primary and secondary schools in one Education Authority located in the North West of England. Ten questionnaires were posted to **500 schools** at the end of June 1998 and returns were received until the end of July 1998.

The number of completed questionnaires represented a 50% return from the total distribution. The 2,527 returns included the views of pupils from reception class to the final year of secondary school. It is significant to note that there **was not one “spoilt paper”**, every questionnaire returned was completed.

The purpose of the study was to **gain an insight into pupils’ views** on what made them **happy and unhappy** at school and what they considered make **a good and a bad teacher**. The wide range of views expressed by the children, were sometimes **amusing**, sometimes **serious**, sometimes **damning**, sometimes **angry**, sometimes **complimentary** and sometimes **disturbing**.

Educational professionals and politicians set the current educational agenda. Their issues tend to focus on “Standards”, “Examinations and League Tables”, “back to Basics”, “Discipline and Behaviour”, “Funding and Resources”, “Curriculum Content”, “Teaching Methods” etc. Such issues generate many, often controversial, debates, where significant value and space is only given to the **adult commentary**.

We were interested in compiling **the pupils’ agenda** by gathering their views and identifying the significant issues, which preoccupy their thinking about school.

One overarching message came from this survey. We must learn how to make time and space to hear what pupils are saying. We should recognise that children hold strong views on issues that are of a direct concern to themselves and their peers. Children are capable of articulating those

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views, given the opportunity. Children's participation may be seen by some as too radical, impractical and trivial or others will patronisingly dismiss their views. **We argue that such views should be valued as an integral part of educational planning, delivery and decision-making at all levels.**

Collaboration between children, professionals and politicians will require us to learn new skills and be more sensitive to a diversity of views expressed by children.

As one 9 year-old boy responded when asked what make a bad teacher?

“A bad teacher always ignores what we say and does not listen to us”

The outcome of such a change in discussion will create a greater insight into the barriers that inhibit learning and the environments that encourage it. If we as adults are committed to providing more effective schooling for all children it is crucial that we hear and respond meaningfully to the voices of those we have a responsibility to serve.

As one 9 year-old girl responded when asked what makes a good teacher?

“A good teacher is someone who can communicate with children and lets them say what they feel”.

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2527 children from 500 schools in one education authority answered the following questions:

1. What makes you happy at school?

Responses:

- 63% indicated **Friendships**
- 25% indicated **particular subjects**
- 6% indicated **recognition of good work**
- 4% indicated **teaching methods**
- 1% indicated **rewards**

- 1% indicated that **nothing at all** made them happy at school.

2. What makes you unhappy at school?

Responses:

- 33% indicated **bullying**
- 25% indicated involvement in **particular subjects**
- 16% indicated **unfairness**
- 14% indicated **falling out with friends**
- 5% indicated that **nothing at all** made them unhappy at school
- 1% indicated **punishments**
- 1% indicated **lack of discipline**
- 1% indicated that **everything** about school made them unhappy

3. What makes a good teacher?

Responses:

- 54% indicated those who were **happy, kind and understanding**
- 27% indicated those who were **respectful and fair**
- 9% indicated those who were **creative**
- 9% indicated those who **didn't shout**
- 0.4% indicated those who **gave rewards**

4. What makes a bad teacher?

Responses:

- 44% indicated those who **shout and are bad tempered**
- 27% indicated those who were **too strict and unfair**
- 13% indicated those who were **disrespectful**
- 8% indicated those who **didn't explain**
- 4% indicated those who had **poor discipline**
- 3% indicated those who **did not like children**
- 0.5% indicated that **bad teachers did not exist**

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The overwhelming significance given to personal relationships and the social skills of teachers, by pupils, would appear to have little connection with the current preoccupations of the policy makers. The adult agenda is important but clearly the issues highlighted by the consumers of education should be given greater significance.

The results of this survey direct us to more effective solutions for reversing the huge increase of pupils being excluded from school, and bringing an end to the discrimination of disabled children who are still denied a right to their local schools with their brothers, sisters and friends.

Full report available from Karen Barton at Bolton Institute

Introduction

In the last twenty years children, in the United Kingdom, have been subjected to more changes in Education Law than in the previous ninety years (*Jeffs, 1995*). Whilst 'special needs' legislation has largely remained in the doldrums since the early 1970's, despite various attempts at reform, there is little doubt that the winds of change have transformed the ethos of state education and the expectations of teachers and pupils in the classroom.

Whilst it remains unclear who the actual beneficiaries have been, what is certain is that the structure of state education has evolved without any reference to the views of the young people it is supposedly there to serve. This may be entirely reasonable for monopoly enterprises contrived to serve the interests of parties other than the stakeholders but what, if anything, do today's stakeholders make of education? What means are available to young people to make their voices heard? What do children say about the experience of being at school in the 1990's?

The new laws prescribe what children will be taught, when and how they will be tested and, ultimately, which children, teachers and schools will be labelled 'unsuccessful' or 'failing'. Within this mass of new legislation, notions of consumer 'choice', 'rights' and 'representation', concepts much vaunted by successive governments as the foundation of effective public services, have been swept aside in the interests of standardisation.

Accountability to central government through rigid national standards and league tables has been sold to parents as 'more choice'. In reality 'choice and diversity in education' has become a contradiction in terms and has little currency other than as a government slogan. Whilst parents may have a degree of choice of which school the child attends and some rights of appeal, their children, as direct consumers of the service, have no formal entitlement in law to make representations and have their voices heard. So often the prevailing modern attitude seems to be a not-so-modern patronisation along the lines of "What would children know about what is best for them?"

In addition to these laws, schools can subject children to a wider range of petty rules and restrictions, which direct many other aspects of their lives (*Franklin, 1995*). Detailed

instructions are available on when to speak and when not to speak, what to do at the sound of a bell, what to wear, when to eat, whom to associate with and punishments to be received. Many adults, including parents, would condone these restrictions believing that without them anarchy would prevail but in effect children have a set of rules and regulations imposed upon them from the age of 5 years without any formal say in the necessity, appropriateness or fairness of such regulations.

There is no other group of people within our society who have such arbitrary and comprehensive restrictions of their daily behaviour without any right of representation. Government, civil servants and schools, under the guise of 'education' or 'protecting their interests' or 'caring', introduce such regulations. Other perhaps more powerful though less benign motives have been suggested by critics since the dawn of state education. It has, for example, long been argued that schools serve primarily as preservers of dominant societal values and conduct underpinned by the class divisions. (*Bowles and Gintis 1977, Bowles, 1977, Bernstein, 1975, McCann, 1977, Lawson and Silver 1973, and Althusser 1972*)

Whilst the majority of children may submit to the prevailing authority, the outcome for those who are unwilling or unable to conform can be devastating, with long term consequences for them, their families and communities well beyond their school years. If children do not conform to school regulations they can be summarily excluded from school, without the right to make formal representations. The explosion in truancy and permanent exclusions from school in the last few years (*DfEE, 1997*) has created an atmosphere of 'moral panic'. This has resulted in the government seeking to blame young people and their parents by attempting to force school attendance through various measures including Court action against parents and increased police powers to detain young people (*Report of the 'Social Exclusion Unit' 1998*).

Whilst parental control and youth crime are serious enough issues within many communities, they do not explain the scale of truancy and exclusion over the last few years (*Wilkinson, 1997*). It has been estimated on the basis of an independent survey that permanent exclusions reached a record 13,500 in 1996-97. (*Godfrey and Parsons, 1998*)

Predictably, the government has sought to rectify the problem, not by questioning the efficacy of the reforms of the past twenty years, nor by seeking the views of young people in

education in any formal way but by imposing ever more draconian regulations with virtually no right of reply.

The limited rights of parents are further eroded if their child becomes subject to 'Special Needs' legislation and disabled children themselves have no opportunities even within the formal assessment or 'Statementing' process to make their wishes known, (*Kennedy, 1995, Hall, 1997*). Their local schools routinely reject them on the basis of their impairments; they are systematically labelled, categorised and separated from their brothers, sisters, friends and peers. Disabled children are transported many miles away from their home; they and their parents can be subjected to local education authorities which are at best indifferent, at worse threatening and intimidating if they do not comply with the regulations. (*Brandon, 1997*)

As children do not have a right to be heard, they can be subject to bad practice and bad policy without consequences (*Jackson and Jackson, 1981*). This continued denial of a child's voice has abuse as its final and inevitable consequence and is unacceptable within a democracy. Whilst individual politicians challenge the present situation and call for a Minister for children, this is not enough. (*Lestor, 1995*). It is important that every opportunity is taken to challenge decisions made in the name of young people without their voice being heard. The present government, it is alleged, do have a commitment to education and combating social exclusion. Notwithstanding their gross failure to attend to important lessons, they would do well to start listening to the children they are there to serve.

A criticism of the present system is not about finding individuals to blame but to look at the way we have created a system that invests authority almost without question in the power of the adult. This is not to suggest that children are always right. Any system of education must, by definition, consider what is broadly in the interests of the child and how this will be presented to them. However, such a position of authority should be open to scrutiny and explained and the children subject to that authority should have their views heard and taken into consideration. School is far too important to be left solely in the care of the adults. Children have important contributions to make in all sectors of education. An indication of an effective school must be the degree to which the diversity of children's contributions are received and given value by being included in the general thinking of the school. The dynamic of debate about education can and should be changed by engaging the children.

The impetus for this study came from other research and observations. These found that where children have significant support needs and have been included in mainstream classes, their classmates and friends were supportive and sustained high levels of academic achievement despite the misgivings of the 'special needs experts' (*Bunch & Valeo, 1998*). At the same time the lack of any student representation in the current debate about inclusive schooling led us to wonder how well students' views are generally known or canvassed. This is therefore a pilot study to look at the views of children on some very broad questions relating to their experiences at school. Further studies will attempt to give more detail to the picture, including the views of disabled and non-disabled pupils on the inclusion of children with additional support needs.

Methodology

Ten questionnaires were sent to each of the 500 primary and secondary schools, chosen at random, in one Local Education Authority. This was intended as a pilot study for a wider survey amongst all North West Local Education Authorities.

The questionnaires were sent with a covering letter to the headteacher requesting them to ask ANY TEN pupils within the school to participate in the survey. The questionnaire contained four open-ended questions:

- What makes you happy at school?
- What makes you unhappy at school?
- What do you think makes a good teacher?
- What do you think makes a bad teacher?

In addition we asked the pupils if they would state their gender and their current school year.

Results

There was an excellent response to the postal questionnaire (*Bell, 1987*). A total of 251 (50%) of the Schools took part, resulting in 2,527 completed questionnaires. Three schools copied the questionnaire, which were then completed by additional pupils, resulting in more than ten returns from these schools. It is important to note, given the context of this report,

that all the returns received were fully completed with not one 'spoilt paper'. All the children had something to say about each of the questions. The responses were direct and illuminating in the uncompromising language of children. Many were disturbing; many contained a refreshing sense of humour. What became apparent was that all 2,527 pupils had something important to say.

More girls than boys were represented in the returns (1,387 girls 55%, to 1,140 boys 45% See Figure A) though it is not clear whether this was a sampling effect or simply a reflection of the general gender ratio within the schools which took part. Also the greatest majority of returns (84%) came from children in Years 1-6 with a large percentage (51%) from Year 6 pupils. Consequently, it is the views of primary-school children and particularly of 10-11 year olds, which are mainly represented in the results. (See Appendix 2, Figures 1 and 1.1)

Some of the children identified particular teachers in their responses. However, all information received was treated with absolute confidentiality and is not to be used in any other research or publication.

The timing helped the exceptional good response to the postal survey. The period toward the end of the school year was chosen, as most of the children would by then have completed formal assessment procedures. This may also explain why there were relatively few returns from the upper years of secondary schools, as many may not have been formally attending.

It was anticipated that the open-ended questions asked would create a significant challenge when collating the returns (*Bell, 1987*) though in the event there was a surprising degree of uniformity in the responses. However, given that the individual responses to all questions totalled 10,108 it was necessary to create categories to summarise and interpret the results.

What appeared to be the most significant response from each child to each question, was recorded. Where there were repeated combinations of comments, categories were created accordingly. For example, in response to the question, 'What makes a good teacher?' many responses included the words 'kind', 'happy' and 'understanding' and therefore a category was created to represent this type of response. Initially, a large number of categories were created to include all of the responses. After further consideration, combining several

together reduced the overall number of categories. The following is a summary of results for each question under the various category headings. The percentage response is given with a brief commentary and one or two examples of responses together with the respondent's gender and school year. Additional examples of responses are given in Appendix 1 with the results summarised graphically in Appendix 2. (Figures 2-5)

1. *What makes you happy at school?*

From the responses to this question 7 categories were created:

- (a) Friendship
- (b) Specific subjects
- (c) Recognition of good work
- (d) Teaching methods
- (e) Rewards
- (f) Nothing at all and
- (g) Other

(Summary of results in figures 2 and 2.1)

1(a) 'Friendship'

An overwhelming majority (62.8%) of the 2,527 children surveyed stated that it was 'friends', which made them happy at school. There was specific mention of particular friendships but also friendly teachers and other friendly pupils. Feeling safe, making other children happy and being trusted by others also added to their happiness.

"When someone says 'you can play with me'" Male Year 3

"All of the friends I have and the friendliness of teachers" Female Year 6

"Feeling wanted. Being accepted for who I am" Male Year 10

1(b) Specific subject

24.7% stated that it was the enjoyment or challenge they gained whilst doing specific subjects. Sports, Drama, Singing and having their work displayed were included in this category.

"When I do subjects that I like and my friends. I do things like our school production JOSEPH" Female Year 6

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1(c) Recognition of Good Work

5.9% said that it made them feel happy when they or the teacher recognised good work or when they learned new things.

“Being praised, when I score in football. Doing good work” Male Year 5

“My friends and security from the teachers and some of the fun work we do” Female Year 6

1(d) Teaching Methods

4.3% suggested that it was the methods teachers used to transmit knowledge which made them happy. The teaching methods included interesting ways of working and teachers who involved the children in particular activities.

“When we make things” Male Year 5

“Being with my friends and learning more and more every day”

Female Year 6

“Good teachers who push you a bit but you aren’t afraid to ask things” Female Year 5

“Being able to co-operate with friends. Also challenges and learning new and exciting things” Female Year 6

1(e) Specific Rewards

Rather surprisingly, specific rewards for work undertaken received only a 0.9% response. Mention of good marks, high grades, positive teacher comments and tangible recognition of good work (house points) were included.

“Getting good comments from teachers and good exam results”

Male Year 6

1(f) Nothing at all

This category included responses with a clearly negative meaning, such as ‘going home’, ‘school holidays’, ‘when teachers are not there’ etc. Only 0.8% stated that nothing at all made them happy at school. It is also important to note that seventeen children said ‘everything’ made them happy at school. These were incorporated within the other categories.

“The 3.15 p.m. bell” Female Year 11

1(g) Other

This included about 0.6% of responses not covered by the other categories such as ‘No boys’, ‘Things I can’t do at home’ ‘Quietness’, ‘Making choices’, ‘No homework’, ‘Small classes’.

2 *What makes you unhappy at school?*

From the responses to this question 9 categories were created:

- (a) Bullying
- (b) Specific subjects
- (c) Unfairness
- (d) Falling out with friends
- (e) Nothing at all
- (f) Punishments
- (g) Lack of discipline
- (h) Everything
- (i) Other

(Summary of results in figures 3 and 3.1)

2(a) Bullying

By far the largest percentage (33.5%) indicated that bullying made them unhappy. Seeing friends being picked on and constant name-calling were included in this category. This question also received a response from one child who described himself as a bully and suggested it was his bullying of others that made him unhappy at school. Responses included specific mention of bullying. 'Nasty/Unkind people', 'People who pick on me/others', 'name calling', 'seeing friends being picked on'.

“Bullying. People don’t see YOU, they see an ugly thick target and scapegoat” Female Year 8

“When people bully me and when I bully them. That makes me unhappy” Male Year 5

“People who make horrible comments about who you are and what you wear...” Female Year 6

2(b) Specific subjects

24.9% of the children said it was their experience within specific subject areas that made them unhappy at school. This was a similar number to those who were happy within

specific subject areas. Responses included: being unable to perform or complete work or having too much work in specific subjects: 'boring work', 'hard work/tests', 'homework'.

"RE and English make me unhappy at school" Male Year 6

"Not doing well in a test" Male Year 6

"When I do not do well or when I get left out, when I don't fit in"

Female Year 6

"I don't like swimming and I don't like work I am not good at"

Female Year 5

"When I get low marks in a test or piece of work" Female. Year 7

2 (c) Unfairness

16.5% said unfairness in all its forms made them unhappy, which included not being listened to by teachers, a sense of injustice and teachers who told them off unfairly. Being subject to rules over which they had no control or no say as well as being subject to the mood swings of particular teachers added to their unhappiness.

"When people are racist and nasty" Female Year 6

"Seeing sad children and teachers..." Female Year 5

"When some people get in trouble in our class and when they have to leave to go to another school" Female Year 6

"When teachers are always in a bad mood" Male Year 10

2(d) Falling out with friends

Allied to the importance of friendship in making children happy at school, some 13.8% said it was falling out with their friends that made them unhappy. Also, friends being ill or wet playtimes indicating being unable to play with friends.

"When I have an argument with friends" Female Year 5

"When I haven't got any one to play with" Female Year 2

2(e) Nothing at all

5.5% said nothing at all makes them unhappy at school which was almost double those that said nothing at school made them happy. Responses included 'home-times,' 'school holidays' or a specific use of the word 'nothing'

"I am very happy at my school" Female Year 6

2(f) Punishments

Punishments were not particularly significant since only 1.5% said this made them unhappy at school. Detention, being put out of the classroom or having to miss break times because of unfinished work were cited as the typical punishment received.

“When people get yellow cards and detentions because it makes some people cry and get upset” Male Year 6

2(g) Lack of Discipline

Lack of discipline by the teacher caused 1.3% of children to be unhappy at school. This sometimes resulted from teachers who are seen as being unable or unwilling to maintain discipline in the classroom, allowing children to be unruly and causing other children to experience unhappiness. In addition teachers who were disorganised in the classroom and general untidiness or broken equipment in the school.

“Sometimes people are not nice and nothing gets done about it”

Male Year 5

2(h) Everything

A very small percentage of children (0.6%) said ‘everything’ about school made them unhappy. The ends of the school day and school holidays were things that they looked forward to the most. Going back to school or simply being at school made them unhappy.

2(i) Other

A variety of miscellaneous responses representing 2.4% of the total were included here including 'boys', ‘smelly toilets’, ‘feeling ill’, ‘stress’ and ‘no second dinners’. Two children mentioned the large class size as making them unhappy and one mentioned having to wear school uniform as being the cause of their unhappiness at school.

3. *What do you think makes a good teacher?*

From the responses 6 categories were created:

- (a) Happy, kind and understanding
- (b) Respectful and fair
- (c) Creative
- (d) Doesn't shout

(e) Rewards

(f) Other

(Summary of results in Figures 4 and 4.1)

3(a) Happy, Kind and Understanding

This category included the greatest majority of responses (53.9%) stating that those who were ‘happy’, ‘kind’, ‘understanding’ or had ‘a sense of humour’ made good teachers. Many mentioned particular teachers by name.

“Being kind and forgiving” Female Year 6

“Kind, loving and understanding” Female Year 4

“A sensitive and caring teacher that will understand” Female Year 6

“A happy, jolly teacher with a good sense of humour, who cares and likes every child in the class” Male Year 6

3(b) Respectful and fair

27.2% of the children stated those teachers who were respectful and fair got their admiration. Typical responses included ‘show they listen’, ‘explain’, ‘like children’, ‘don’t show you up’, ‘notice you’, ‘say how they feel’, ‘strict when need to be’, ‘encourage you’ and ‘teachers you can be friends with’

“One that is fair and helps you when you get stuck on something”

Female Year 4

“Someone with patience and likes children” Female. Year 6

3(c) Creative

9.2% said when teachers were creative this made them good teachers. This included teachers who were enthusiastic about what they were saying and doing, those who were prepared for their lessons and those who excited them. Typical responses included: ‘intelligent’, ‘encourage and excite us’, ‘show they enjoy their job,’ ‘enthusiastic’, ‘confident’, ‘experienced’ and ‘get everyone to work’.

“Someone who makes a lesson interesting, so you concentrate and want to learn” Female Year 7

“Someone who can plan lessons well, someone who can make lessons interesting” Male Year 10

“Someone who makes learning easy and fun” Female Year 6

“Colourful and interesting to listen to” Female Year 11

3(d) Doesn't shout

9.1% said when they didn't shout or scream.

“When they explain things properly and don't get angry when you don't understand”

Female Year 10

“Not being too strict and not coming to conclusions without asking questions first” Male
Year 6

3(e) Rewards

Again, rewards given by teachers didn't seem to significantly determine whether they were seen as 'good' teachers. Only 0.4% highlighted rewards from the teachers as making them good at their job. Typical responses included 'tell you when you have done well', and 'praise your work'.

3(f) Other

Only 0.2% responses were included here. These included 'nice to look at', 'don't know' and 'one that's not there'.

4 What do you think makes a bad teacher?

8 categories were created from the responses:

- (a) Shouts/bad tempered
- (b) Too strict/unfair
- (c) Disrespectful
- (d) Doesn't explain
- (e) Poor discipline
- (f) Not liking children
- (g) Nothing at all
- (h) Other

(Summary of Results in figures 5 and 5.1)

4(a) Shouts/bad tempered

The largest percentage of responses (44.2%) suggested that it was teachers who shouted or were in a 'bad mood' that made them bad teachers. Particular teachers were mentioned by some of the children. Significantly, many of the children highlighted that teachers who were

‘unhappy’ made bad teachers. It is important to be reminded that children are sensitive to and frequently suffer the consequences of stress and ‘low morale’ amongst teachers.

“A bad tempered strict person who doesn’t like children at all”

Male Year 6

“One thing that makes a bad teacher is when they are down in the dumps all the time and they are really stressed” Male Year 6

“Shouting all the time, doesn’t have a sense of humour and is always too busy to listen”

Female Year 6

“When they are mad” Female Year 1

4(b) Too strict/unfair

Another 26.8% said teachers were bad if they were too strict and unfair. Typical responses included specific use of the words ‘strict’ and ‘unfair’; ‘no sense of humour’; ‘tells you off unfairly’; ‘too much work/hard work’ and mention of particular teachers.

“A bad teacher is someone who makes you do the same thing every lesson, like reading or copying out of a text book. When you do your work wrong, bad teachers don’t help you they just tell you off. They don’t treat pupils equally and they always moan about you when they haven’t even tried to help you” Female Year 8

“A bad teacher is dismissive and has favourites. Never congratulates the less able children for achieving high standards” Female Year 6

4(c) Disrespectful

About 13% responded that being disrespectful and unfair made bad teachers. Typical responses included ‘don’t listen’, ‘don’t care’, ‘don’t respect you’, ‘patronising, being sexist’, ‘ignore you’, ‘impatient’, ‘lie’, ‘don’t understand’.

“Having a pet (like a favourite pupil) and also treating one sex different to the other”

Female Year 6

“Someone who blames you because they don’t like you.” Male Year 10

“Accusing people because they can’t be bothered to find out the truth” Female Year 8

4(d) Doesn’t explain

7.6% of the children referred to teachers who did not explain the work. Typical responses included use of the word ‘explain’ and ‘doesn’t help’.

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“Someone who won’t give anyone a second chance or help them with work if they don’t understand” Female Year 6

“Refuses to explain things more than once, if the child does not understand” Female Year 5

“Someone who makes you do work out of a book and does not explain it very well” Female Year 9

“A bad teacher that drags little boys and girls around and says get on with your work even though you don’t understand it” Female Year 5

4(e) Poor discipline

About 4.1% indicated that teachers who could not maintain discipline were bad teachers. Typical responses included; ‘ignore disruptive children’ and ‘don’t push you/are lazy’.

“Teachers that let you off when you’ve been silly or stupid” Male Year 6 *“Someone who lets bad things happen and ignores them”* Male Year 6

“A teacher that lets the big children do what they want” Male Year 3

4(f) Not liking children

2.8% of children said specifically that those who did not like children or were aggressive made bad teachers. Typical responses included specific reference to ‘not liking children’, ‘aggressive’, or ‘uses force’.

“Someone who thinks students are the enemy” Female Year 9

“Trying to scare children into behaving themselves by giving out immediate threats the minute you walk through the door. This makes pupils turn against the teacher and not like them or want to do work for them” Male Year 10

“Someone who doesn’t like children and is violent” Male Year 6

4(g) Nothing at all

0.5% of children said they did not know what made a bad teacher.

“I don’t know because I haven’t met one” Female Year 4

This was in contrast to the child who suggested that the ‘good’ teacher be

“The one who doesn’t exist” Male Year 6

4(h) Other

About 0.5% responses came into this category. Responses included: ‘not intelligent’ and ‘wears funny clothes’.

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Discussion

Perhaps the most positive outcome of this survey was the opportunity to read the clear and uncompromising views of such a large number of children. They were unrestrained in their praise and scathing in their criticism and many mentioned particular teachers as examples of good and not so good practice. Such a survey produces results, which can be both illuminating and challenging, and one may or may not agree with specific content. However, the crucial issue here is the relative value we place on inviting, receiving and responding to young people's views. The fact that many responses would make some teachers smile and others wince does not validate or invalidate them any more than a vote for or against the government can be dismissed in a democracy.

Unfortunately, children's views can easily be dismissed by adults with an indulging smile or an angry word and it is undoubtedly true that the results of this survey will be dismissed by many in one simple phrase: "they're only children". Nonetheless there are many important conclusions to be drawn and, for many adults, perhaps a confirmation of what they already know from their own school experiences. The main findings from the survey will be discussed under the four question headings.

Some caution is needed in interpreting the results, as the percentage responses in each category have to be related clearly to the context of the original questions. For example, the 33.5% who responded that 'bullying' made them unhappy at school does not necessarily imply that a third of the children were the victims of bullying at the time of the survey, or that 54% had teachers who are 'happy, kind and understanding' and 44% had teachers who 'shout and are bad tempered'. All these things may be true but they could not be inferred directly from these results. What is safe to conclude is that the children have very clear ideas about what makes 'a friend', 'a bully', 'a good teacher', 'a bad teacher' and that these constructs have been learned through first hand experience and observation.

What makes you happy at school?

In September 1998 there will be around 1.2 million children starting and continuing with their primary and secondary school education in England and Wales. Moving into any new school can be a daunting experience for children and parents alike. The most important factor, according to our survey, that will assist children in ensuring their time at the school is

a happy one is joining the new school with existing friends or the potential for developing new friendships.

Friendships appear to be a major factor in enabling children to cope with their schooling experience (*Gray 1995*). The significance of friendships expressed by large numbers of children suggests their great importance in helping them to understand their own place in the school community. It is therefore crucial that children are encouraged to feel safe and develop relationships in school which are meaningful to them. Friendships have to be formed, nurtured and given space and opportunity to grow. Despite regulations and pressures on teachers and children to conform it is through friendships that children can find expression and acceptance of their differences. They will go to great lengths to demonstrate difference whilst wanting acceptance of that difference. Acceptance can bring security and safety from those who appear to challenge your difference. It is from a position of security with your own difference there comes a great potential to tolerate and accept the difference in others. (*O' Brien & Forest 1989, Hall 1997, Gabriel 1969*)

Many children also indicated that their enjoyment of particular subjects made them happy at school. It is reassuring to know that, at least for some, the academic content of school life is equated with happiness. However, the second significant finding here is that, happiness derived from 'recognition of good work', 'teaching methods' and 'specific use of rewards', is minimal when compared to 'friendship'. It would be interesting to see a re-evaluation of the purpose of education and teacher training in terms of 'the ability to promote co-operation and friendship between students'. Regrettably, one foresees the emergence of 'friendship managers' as part of a government project to boost the performance of certain 'failing' schools. Nonetheless, future debates about the 'purpose of education' could prove to be a good deal more interesting and relevant.

What makes you unhappy at school?

The main finding here is that most children perceive 'bullying' in school as the major cause of unhappiness. The presence of bullying within many of our schools is an indication that many vulnerable children are unable to accept their own difference, and seek to exploit or damage the difference in others. The denial by many schools that bullying is a significant issue is a failure to accept the pain and suffering experienced by so many children. The practice of shouting and demonstration of unhappiness expressed by so many teachers must

also be an expression of vulnerability and insecurity. Where do children learn the often-sophisticated behaviours of bullying?

It was a telling message from this survey that it is not only the children who experience bullying who feel unhappiness but also those who witness such behaviours and are described as “Bullies”. (Olweus 1993). One child who described himself as a bully wanted someone to stop him from carrying out his bullying behaviour.

It is difficult to acknowledge that on occasions we behave in ways we don't like. But the external pressures to change our unwanted behaviours are not always effective and even our own desperate desire to change unwanted behaviours is sometimes inadequate. In order to change those behaviours, which can be harmful to others, they have firstly to be acknowledged by oneself. Friendships that are open and honest allow and sometimes encourage such acknowledgement. This process of change through friendships may be more conveniently observed with hindsight but the subtle changes that occur are far less identifiable.

It is not necessarily a programme that will enable people to change unwanted behaviours such as bullying but the creation of a safe school environment where people can explore their diversity and relationships with each other.

What do you think makes a good teacher?

An important conclusion to be drawn here is that it is the teacher's personal qualities rather than technical ‘teacher skills’ which mostly determine how the children recognise a ‘good teacher’. Teachers who are ‘happy, kind and understanding’ and ‘respectful’ and ‘fair’ may also use interesting ways of working, ‘recognise good work’ and use ‘rewards’ but the children place far greater emphasis on the first two categories.

The emphasis on the teaching methods used to teach certain skills and knowledge may come to nothing if the environment is not conducive to a particular individual at any given time. The skills and knowledge of a child are not always a clear expression of their understanding or indeed their desire for such understanding. Children may acquire particular skills in a given subject but also take away a deep hatred of what it stands for because of the oppressive teaching methods that may have been applied. The on-going debate about so-

called 'progressive' versus 'traditional' teaching methods is a boring irrelevance and reflects the opposition of political dogmas more than the concerns of children. Any teaching method may be effective for a particular child in a particular situation for a particular set of skills. The methods applied by the teacher are not necessarily significant. What is significant, however, is the relationship that exists between the child and the teacher and the environment in which learning can take place.

What do you think makes a bad teacher?

The main finding was that the children again primarily associated 'bad teachers' with poor personal skills. Technical skills such as 'doesn't explain' and 'poor discipline' received relatively few responses compared with 'too strict/unfair', 'disrespectful' and 'shouts/bad tempered', the latter receiving a majority of responses. Many felt driven to mention particular teachers but it was also clear that the children were sensitive to the fact that some teachers were 'unhappy' or 'stressed out'.

All teachers shout sometimes but it is reasonable to conclude, given the nature of the responses, that the children could identify those who are routinely bad tempered. Children will learn in an environment which is safe and supportive. This does not mean it has to be comfortable, but safety must be a prerequisite for learning and learning new skills can be disconcerting for people of any age. Positive skills and insights can come following feelings of discomfort. However, what is crucial is a sense of safety and trust in those around you; that you are not going to be made fun of; are not going to be ridiculed for making mistakes and that you are not going to be punished unfairly or excessively.

It is a perverse and unhealthy situation for all when children are routinely punished in schools for making mistakes. Classrooms should be the safest place to make mistakes. Mistakes are a fundamental part of learning and understanding. A child who feels safe is far more likely to take risks or experiment with knowledge than one who feels unsafe.

Ways forward

It is essential to articulate a vision for schools, in which every learner belongs and is actively encouraged to contribute and where those contributions are received and valued for their richness and diversity. Those who administer and teach have to recognise that those more fundamental changes, relating to the rights and representations of children, are necessary for

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learners to make their personal and unique contributions. Schools have to learn that different contributions can be valued equally to the benefit of the whole school. Difference should not be sacrificed on the altar of artificial standardisation of individuals.

Schools must be made more welcoming to the pupils they are there to serve. We have to create a sense of hospitality which encourages children to feel safe and a part. Schools have the potential to enable children to develop relationships and to enable the individual child to translate his or her presence into meaningful relationships inside and outside the school gates.

The promotion of friendships between learners with diverse needs and the acceptance of difference and diversity are important first steps to the elimination of irrational fears about the difference of others. The present climate of an over-centralised national curriculum underpinned by a league-table mentality and an obsession with testing children makes the acceptance of diversity among learners much more difficult. However, we have to continue to articulate a vision of schooling beyond the present facade of league tables, which distort and devalue the importance of relationships between children and teachers. We must start to listen more closely to what all children have to say, particularly those who have traditionally been excluded. Their voices have yet to be heard and their contribution is desperately needed.

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Appendix 1 - Additional Examples of Responses

1. What makes you happy at school?

"When everybody is kind and helpful and everybody are friends" Female, Year 6

"Playing nice" Female, Year 2

"Feeling safe" Female, Year 6

"When everybody else is happy" Female, Year 6

"Seeing my friends. The sports competitions and having a nice game of football outside"
Male, Year 6

"Swimming and football make me happy at school" Male, Year 6

"When I am allowed to join in games and help people who are lost find their way" Female,
Year 6

2. What makes you unhappy at school?

"When people make fun of me" Male, Year 6

"Being called for something you can't help...being shy" Female, Year 10

"Being told off and called names by the teacher and friends" Male, Year 6

"Being bullied and ganged up on" Male, Year 6

"When my friends get bullied" Male, Year 6

"Someone bullying me" Male, Year 3

"This girl at my school keeps bullying me. (Worse still she will be in the same form as me next year!)" Female, Year 6

"When you hear about other pupils that are being bullied" Female, Year 10

"When people pick on me and call me fat" Female, Year 6

"Not fitting in" Female, Year 6

"Bullying makes me very unhappy, upset and isolated. I feel that I cannot talk to anyone about it" Female, Year 5

"Getting battered" Female, Year 2

"I don't like fights at school they make me feel all strange inside and most of the time I try to stop them" Female, Year 6

"Getting shouted at and getting told off when you haven't done anything, but they still blame you" Female, Year 5

"The teacher asks for suggestions and I put my hand up all the time and never get asked once..." Male, Year 5

3. What do you think makes a good teacher?

"Looking after me when my mum is not at school to pick me up" Male, Year 3

"I think a good teacher is one that listens to what you have to say" Male, Year 6

"Someone who cares and is not biased. Someone who you feel you can talk to and who'll not judge you or ignore you when you need attention" Female, Year 11

"When they understand how people feel...when they don't laugh at your work when your not so good at the subject" Male, Year 6

"Teachers that are funny and give you chances" Male, Year 6

"When they have a laugh with you...and are kind and helpful" Male, Year 6

"Someone who knows how to laugh" Female, Year 6

"Being fun and welcoming you" Male, Year 6

4. What do you think makes a bad teacher?

"Always shouting, picking on pupils, and labelling them..." Male, Year 10

"A bad teacher is a teacher who is miserable, grumpy and who shouts a lot" Female, Year 5

"When they don't care about me" Female, Year 2

"A teacher that screams at you when you do a mistake. A teacher that just doesn't care"
Male, Year 6

"Hates children, thinks she's ace. Loves uniform and the only thing she comes to school for is coffee" Male, Year 6

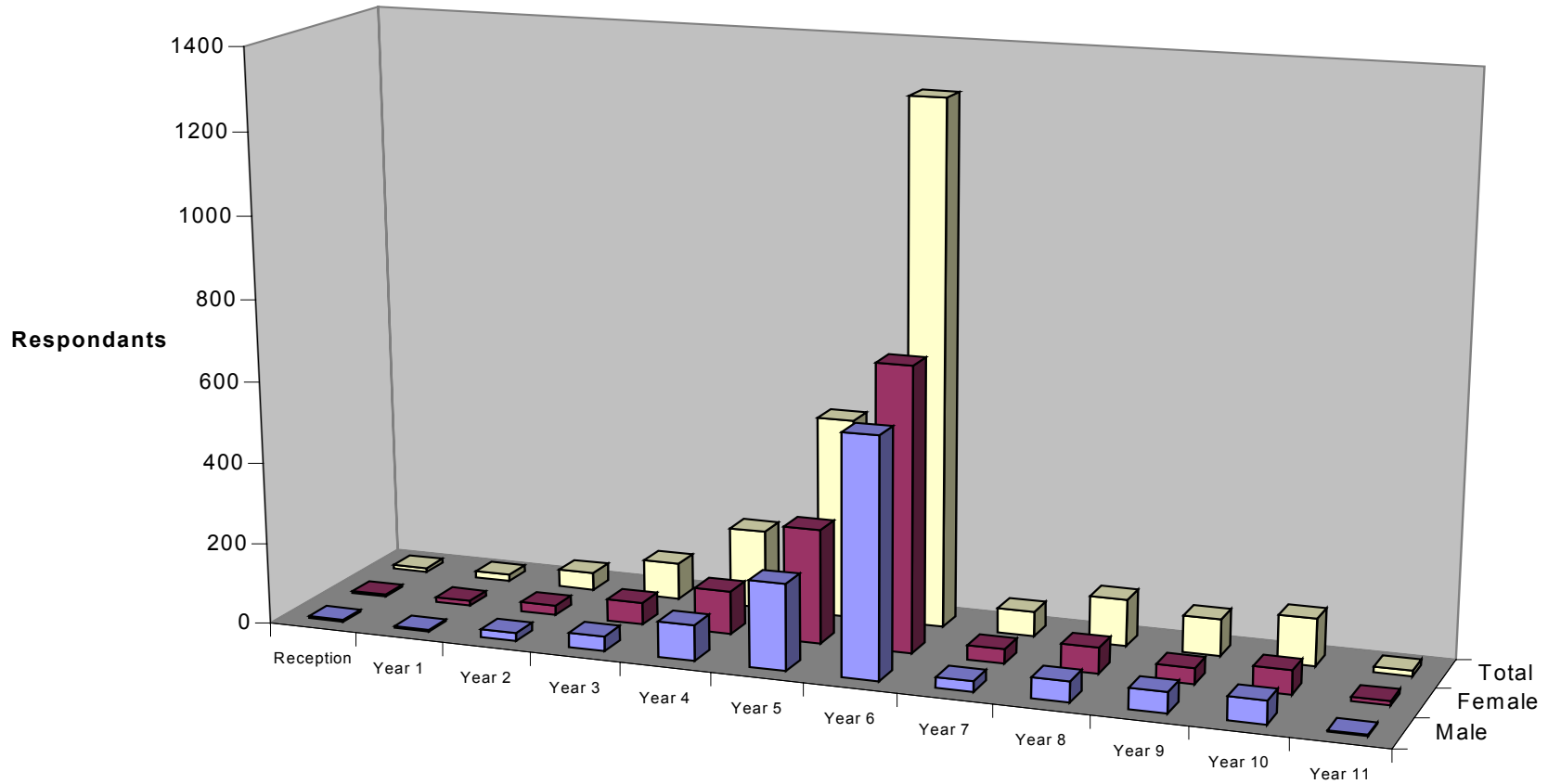
"Someone not being fair on everyone" Female, Year 6

"They take no notice of the not so clever one" Female, Year 5

Appendix 2

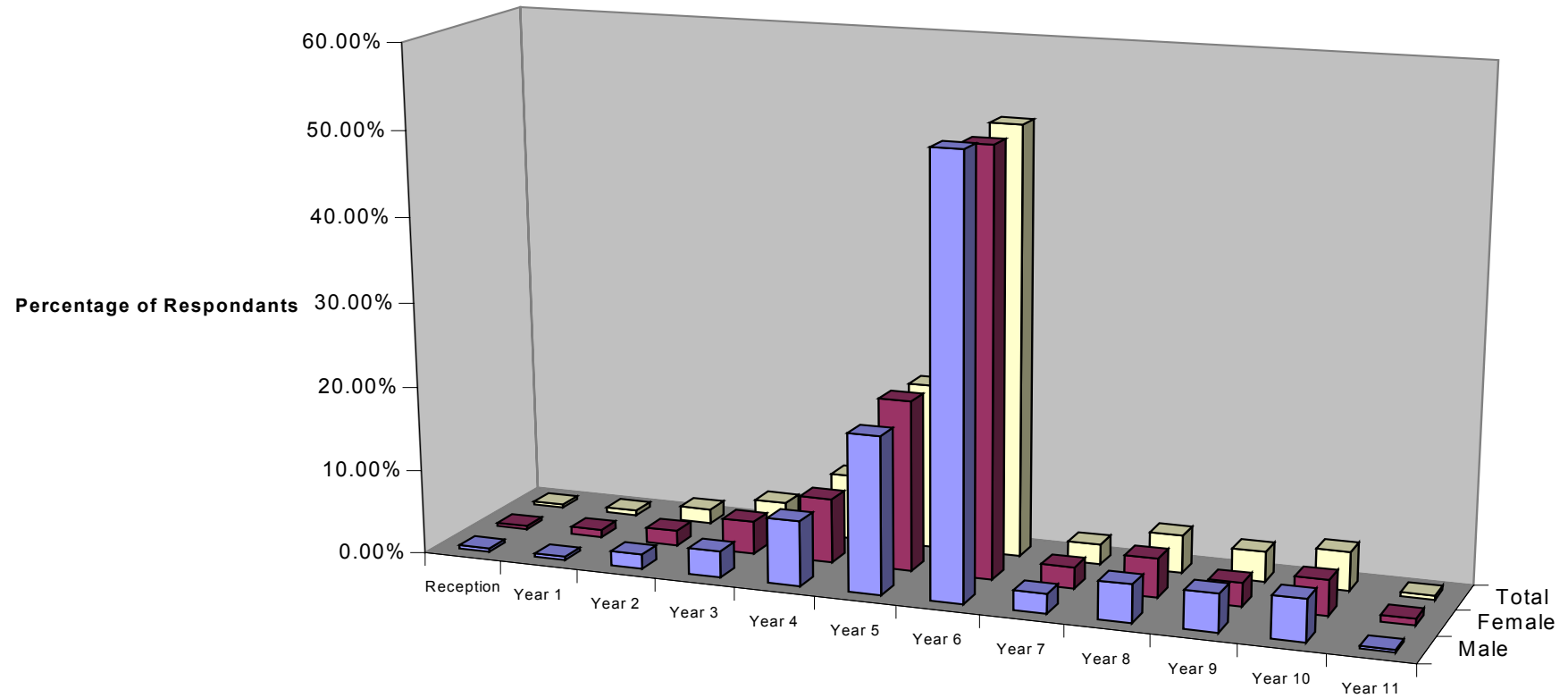
Graphs illustrating total responses

Figure 1. Respondant totals by gender and year group



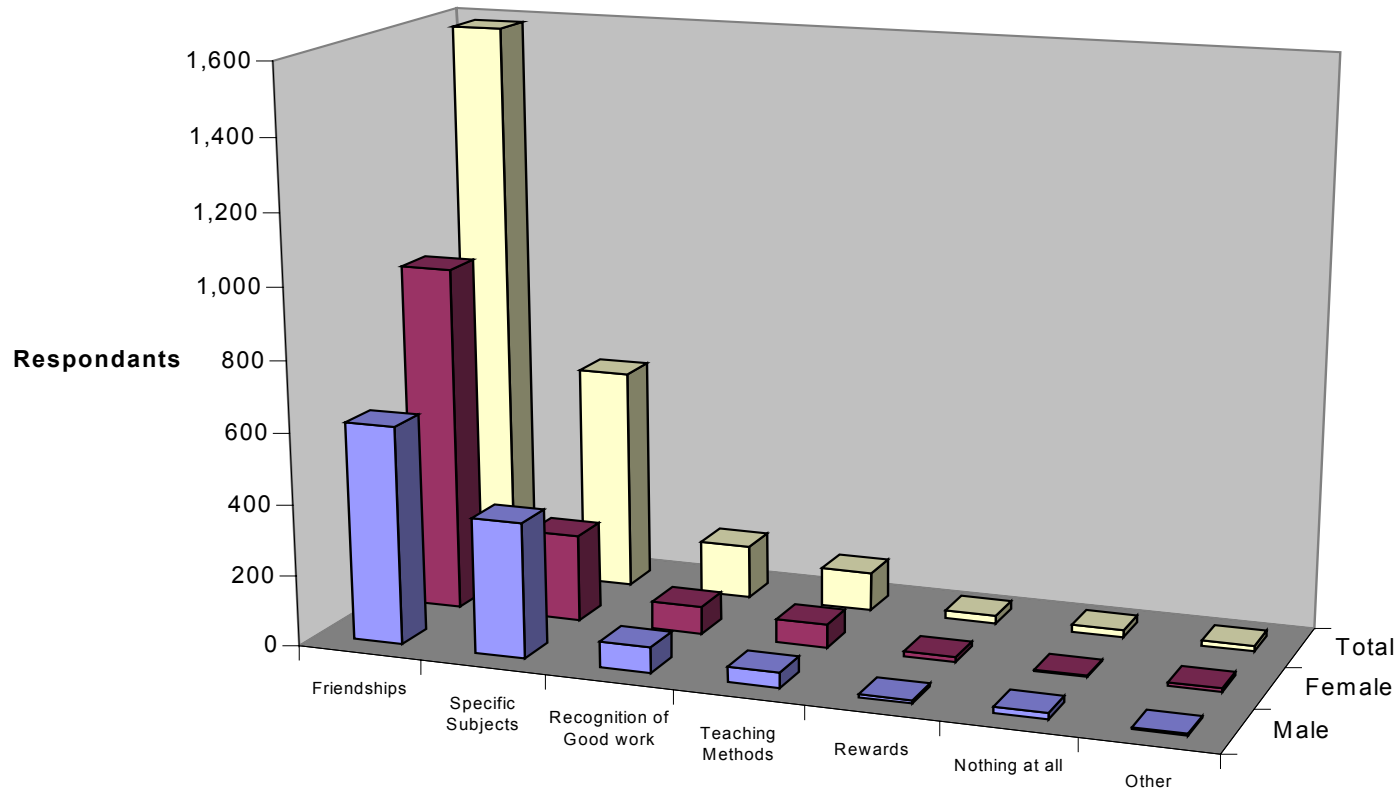
	Reception	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
Male	5	4	20	36	88	212	587	26	51	51	57	3
Female	5	12	23	54	106	281	698	35	64	39	59	11
Total	10	16	43	90	194	493	1,285	61	115	90	116	14

Figure 1.1 Respondant totals by gender and year group



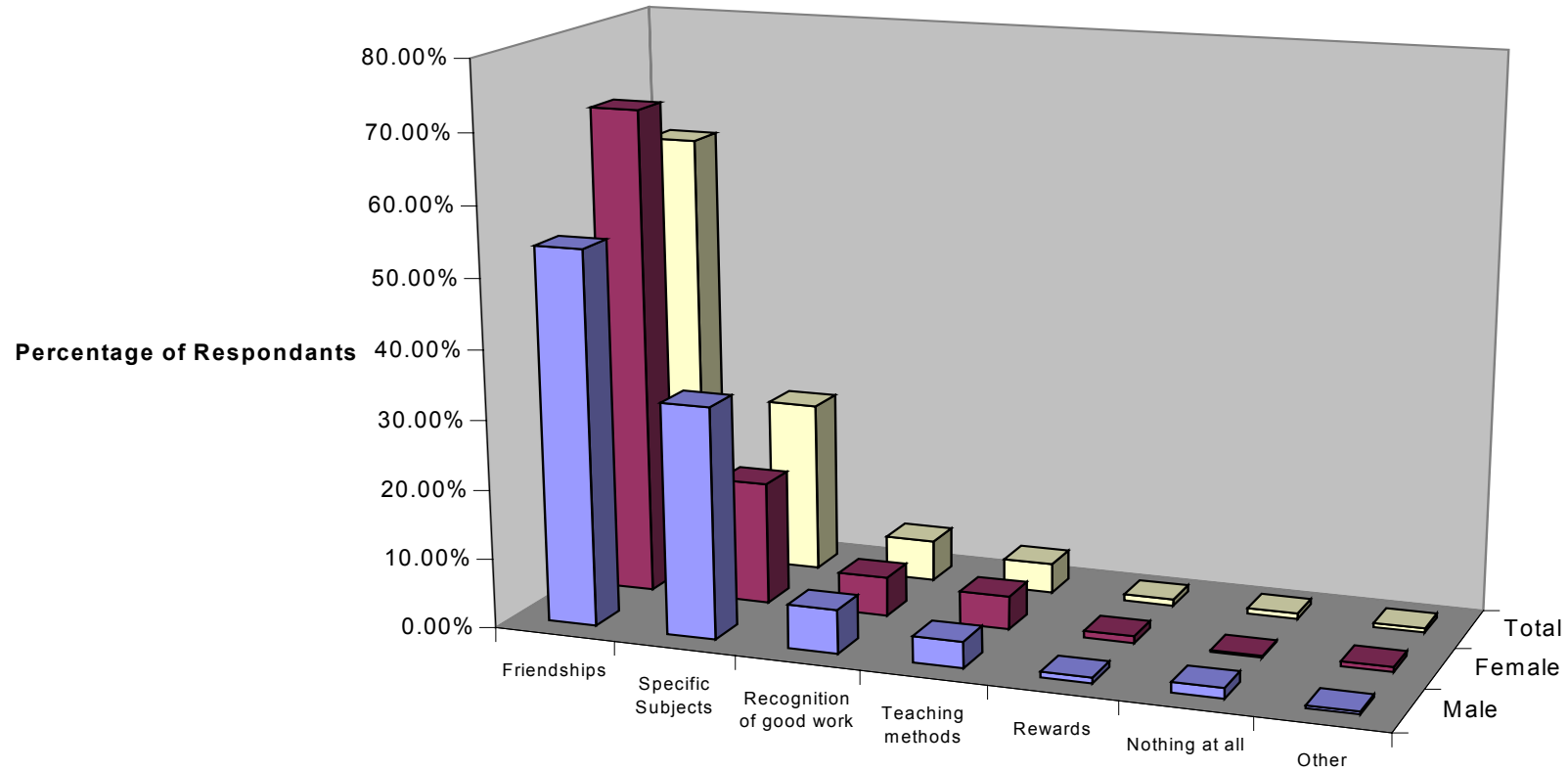
	Reception	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
Male	0.40%	0.40%	1.70%	3.10%	7.70%	18.60%	51.50%	2.30%	4.50%	4.50%	5%	0.30%
Female	0.40%	0.90%	1.80%	3.90%	7.60%	20.20%	50.30%	2.50%	4.60%	2.80%	4.20%	0.80%
Total	0.40%	0.60%	1.70%	3.50%	7.70%	19.60%	50.90%	2.40%	4.50%	3.60%	4.60%	0.50%

Figure 2 What makes you happy at school?



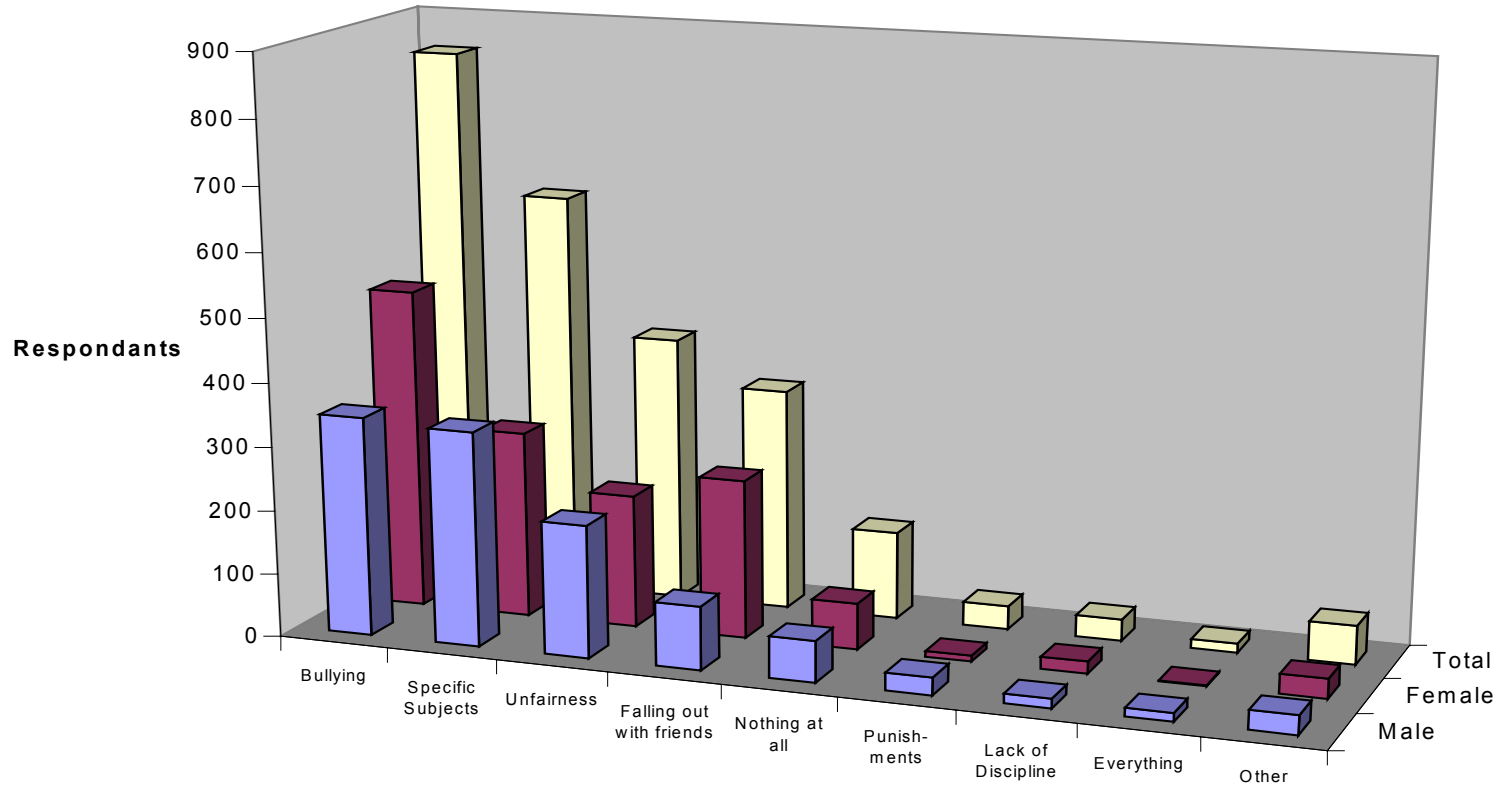
	Friendships	Specific Subjects	Recognition of Good work	Teaching Methods	Rewards	Nothing at all	Other
Male	614	380	72	43	9	17	5
Female	972	244	78	66	14	3	10
Total	1,586	624	150	109	23	20	15

Figure 2.1 What makes you happy at school?



	Friendships	Specific Subjects	Recognition of good work	Teaching methods	Rewards	Nothing at all	Other
Male	53.90%	33.30%	6.30%	3.80%	0.80%	1.50%	0.40%
Female	70.10%	17.60%	5.60%	4.80%	1.00%	0.20%	0.70%
Total	62.80%	24.70%	5.90%	4.30%	0.90%	0.80%	0.60%

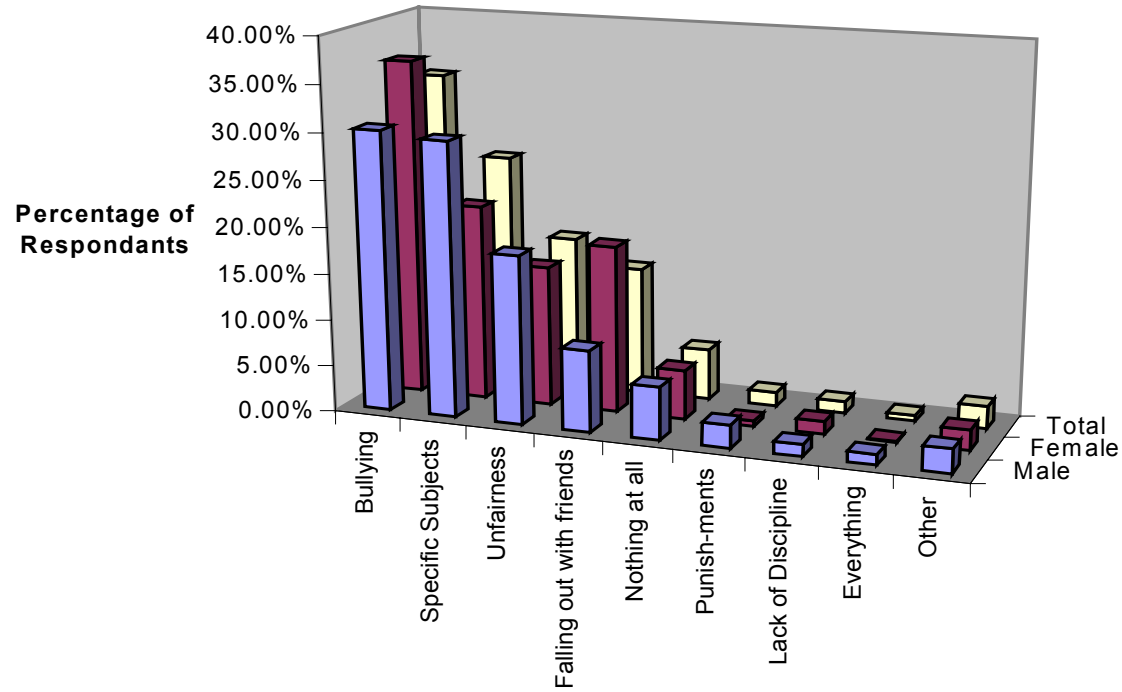
Figure 3. What makes you unhappy at school?



	Bullying	Specific Subjects	Unfairness	Falling out with friends	Nothing at all	Punish-ments	Lack of Discipline	Everything	Other
Male	344	337	208	100	65	28	15	13	30
Female	503	293	209	249	73	9	19	1	31
Total	847	630	417	349	138	37	34	14	61

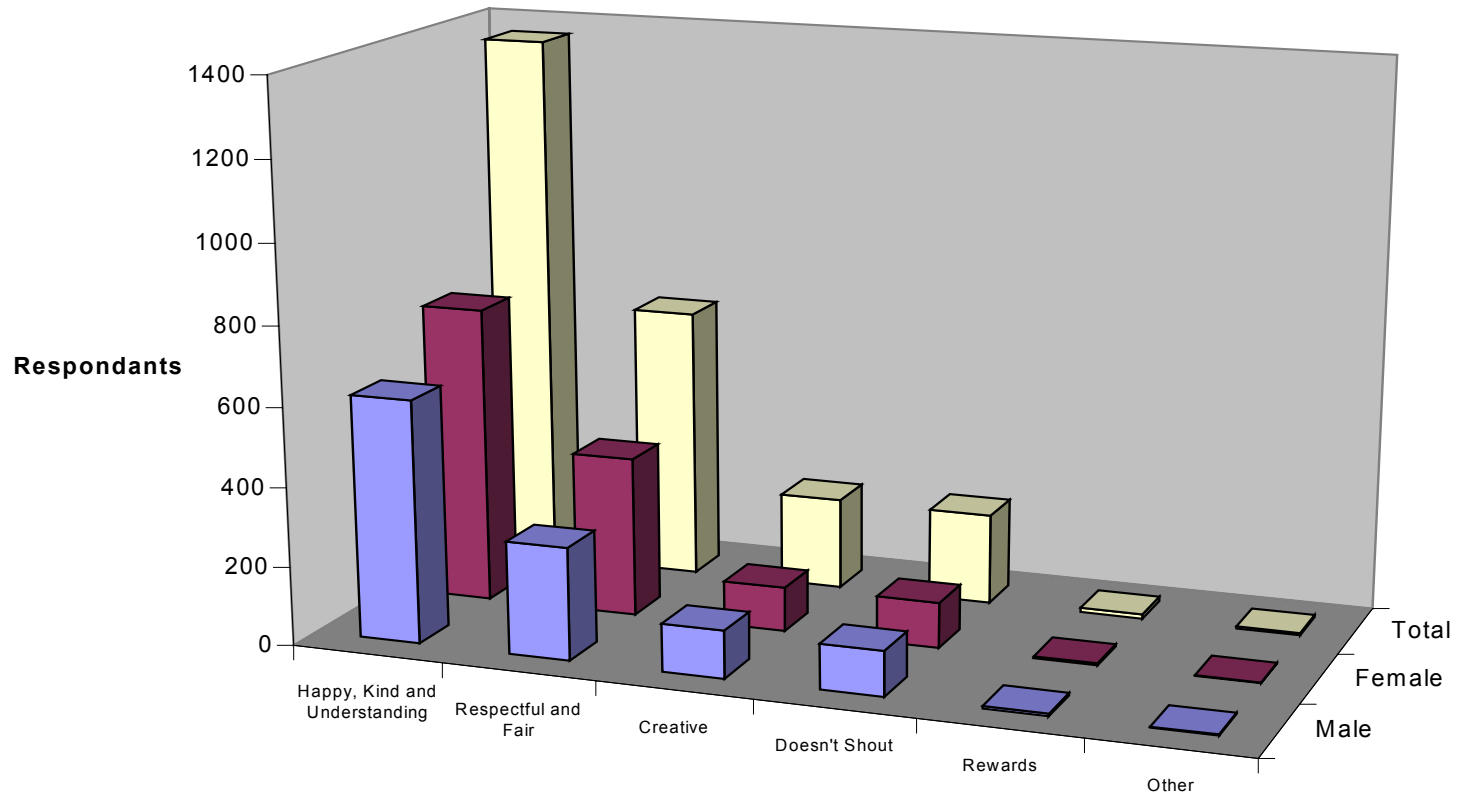
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Figure 3.1 What makes you unhappy at school?



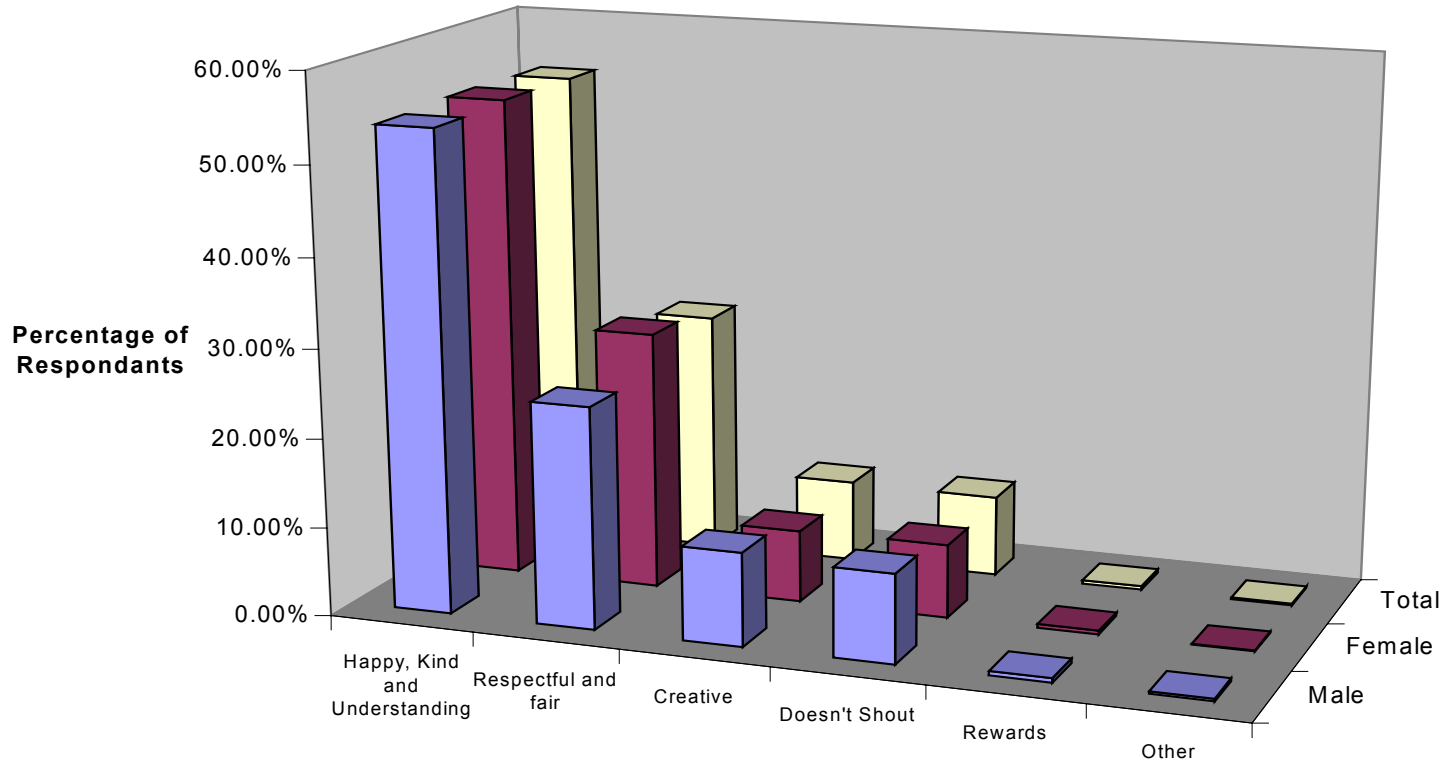
	Bullying	Specific Subjects	Unfairness	Falling out with friends	Nothing at all	Punish-ments	Lack of Discipline	Everything	Other
Male	30.20%	29.60%	18.20%	8.80%	5.70%	2.50%	1.30%	1.10%	2.60%
Female	36.20%	21.10%	15.10%	18.00%	5.30%	0.60%	1.40%	0.10%	2.20%
Total	33.50%	24.90%	16.50%	13.80%	5.50%	1.50%	1.30%	0.60%	2.40%

Figure 4. What do you think makes a good teacher?



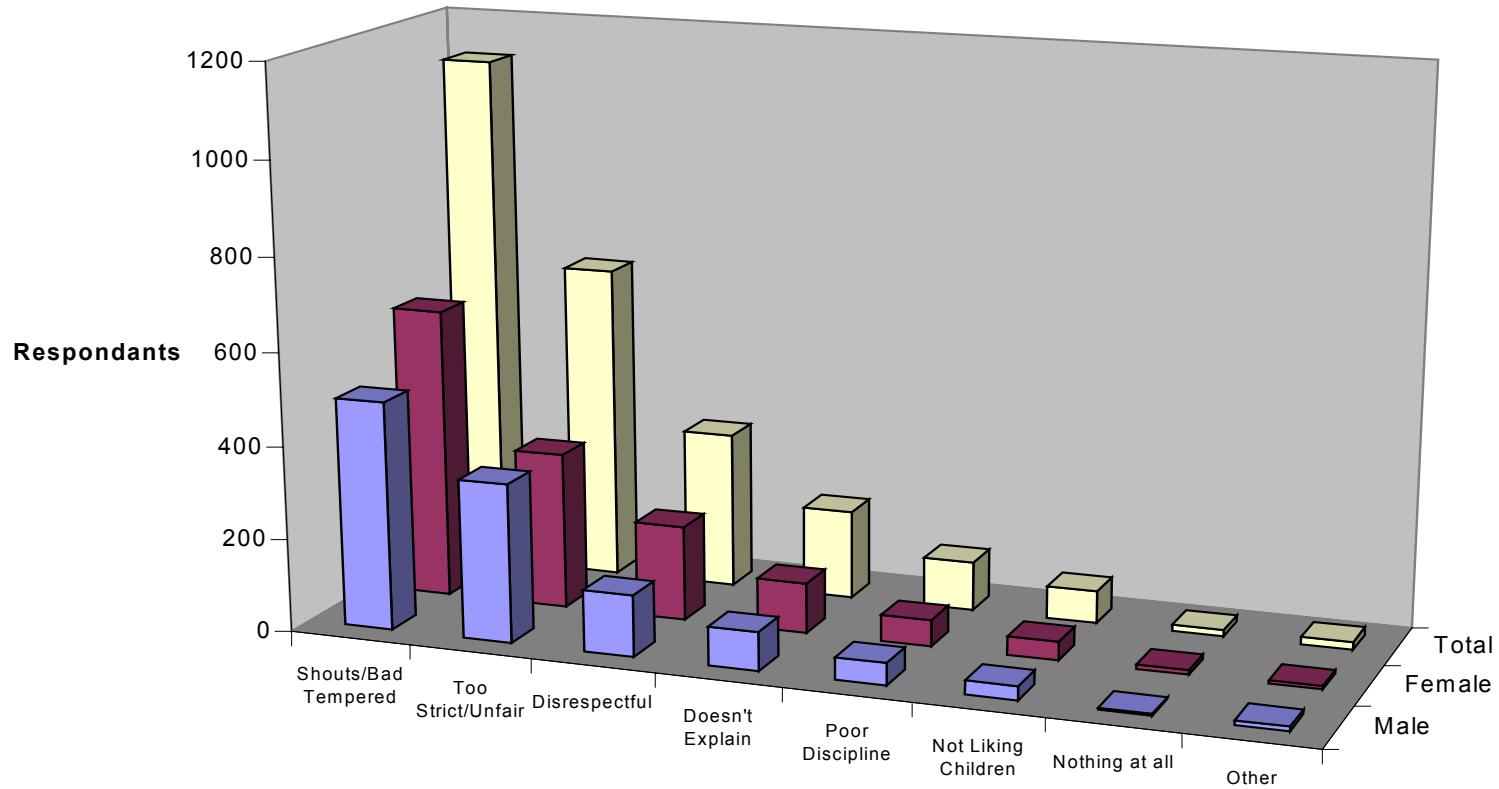
	Happy, Kind and Understanding	Respectful and Fair	Creative	Doesn't Shout	Rewards	Other
Male	613	284	120	114	6	3
Female	750	403	112	115	5	2
Total	1,363	687	232	229	11	5

Figure 4.1 What do you think makes you a good teacher?



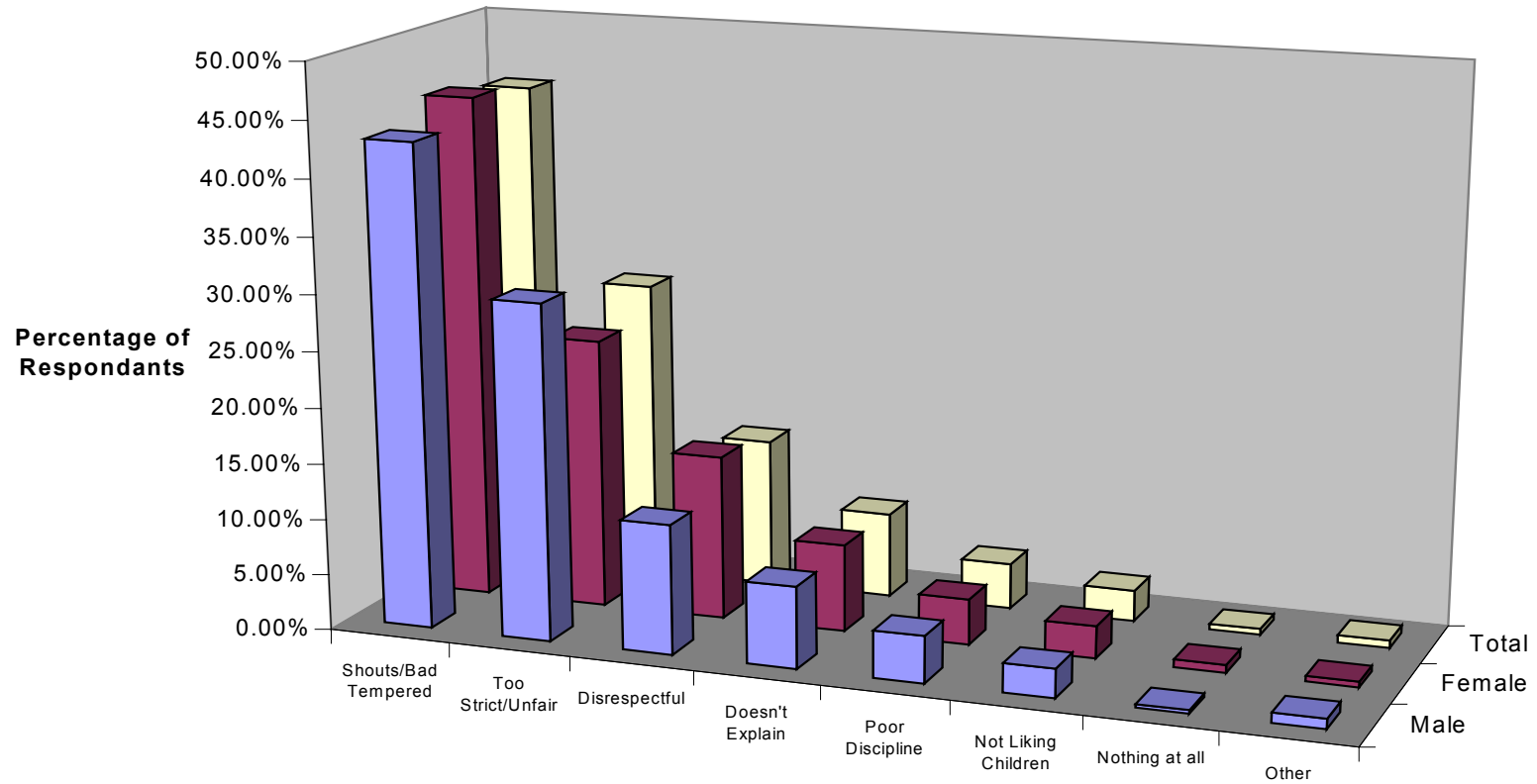
	Happy, Kind and Understanding	Respectful and fair	Creative	Doesn't Shout	Rewards	Other
Male	53.80%	24.90%	10.50%	10.00%	0.50%	0.30%
Female	54.10%	29%	8.10%	8.30%	0.40%	0.10%
Total	53.90%	27.20%	9.20%	9.10%	0.40%	0.20%

Figure 5. What do you think makes a bad teacher?



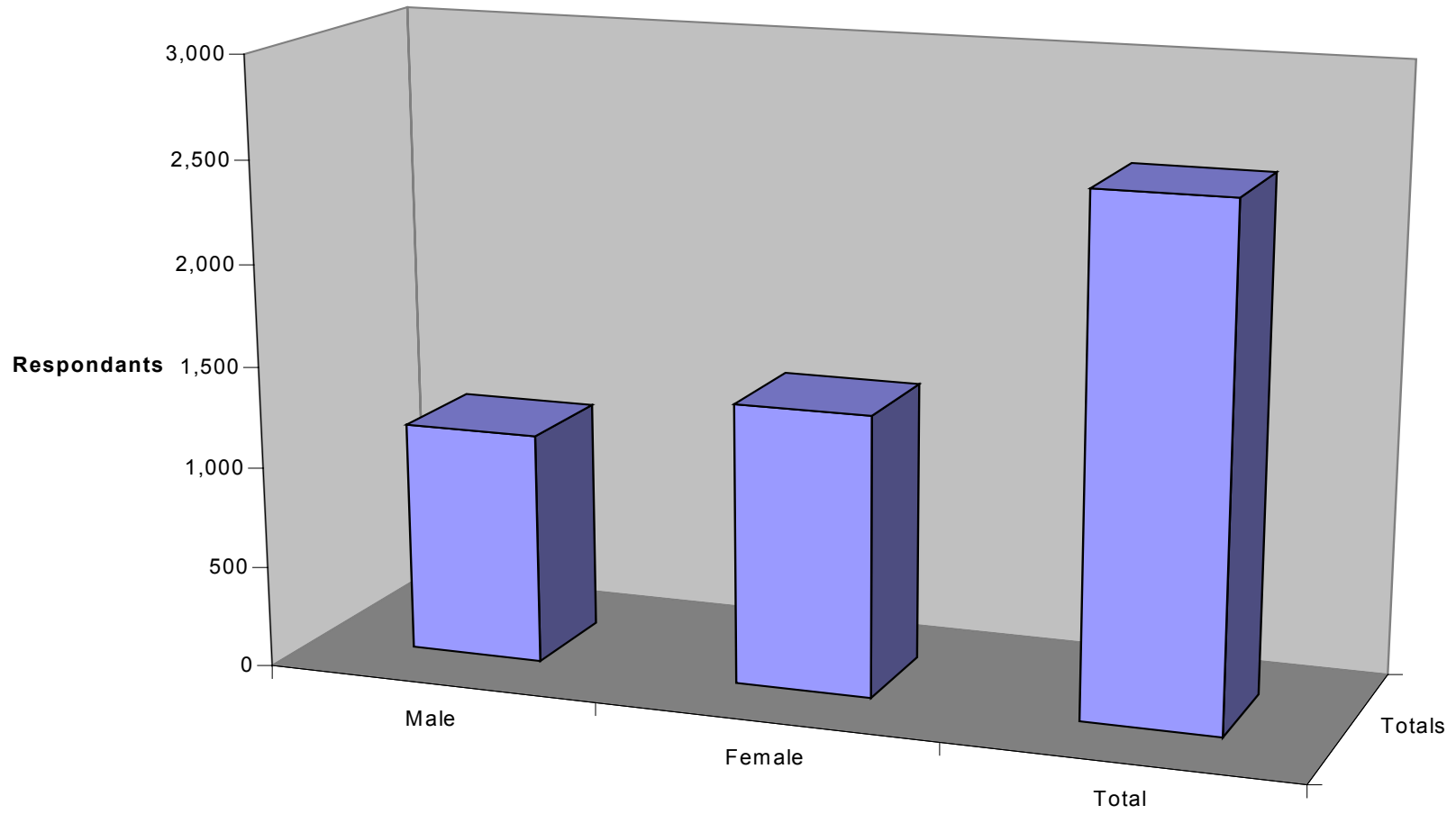
	Shouts/Bad Tempered	Too Strict/Unfair	Disrespectful	Doesn't Explain	Poor Discipline	Not Liking Children	Nothing at all	Other
Male	492	342	132	83	48	30	4	10
Female	625	336	204	108	57	40	10	7
Total	1,117	678	336	191	105	70	14	17

Figure 5.1 What do you think makes a bad teacher?



	Shouts/Bad Tempered	Too Strict/Unfair	Disrespectful	Doesn't Explain	Poor Discipline	Not Liking Children	Nothing at all	Other
Male	43.10%	30.00%	11.60%	7.30%	4.20%	2.60%	0.30%	0.90%
Female	45.10%	24.20%	14.70%	7.80%	4.10%	2.90%	0.70%	0.50%
Total	44.20%	26.80%	13.30%	7.60%	4.10%	2.80%	0.50%	0.70%

Figure A. Total number of Respondants



	Male	Female	Total
Totals	1,140	1,387	2,527