Accessing Student Voices

Leila and Oscar, 11th-grade teachers in an urban high school serving a high percentage of low-income and minority students, meet every Thursday to plan so that their courses (Leila’s in history, Oscar’s in English) align as much as possible. This week, with the SAT tests coming up, they have set aside time to talk about the students they share — and, in particular, whether every student is headed for college.

One difference this week: They’ve brought a dozen students into their conversation. As everyone finds places at desks pushed into an open rectangle, Oscar starts the conversation. “How’re you feeling about the test on Saturday?”

After 20 minutes of discussion, Sulimah has shared her worry that, when she times herself on practice SATs, she only gets through half of the questions. Daniela has revealed that her parents, immigrants from the Dominican Republic, do not want her to leave home to attend the university that has been sending her information. Marco has talked about why an offer from the military recruiter seems enticing to his family but not to him.

Several of the students give a long moan of agreement after Alberto says that his father has put his foot down on the subject of taking on debt for college. “He’s scared because he doesn’t know enough about the whole college thing,” Alberto says. “He doesn’t even want me to take the SATs.”

Leila, the teacher who has been taking notes all the while, looks around the circle. “It sounds like your focus here is educating your families about college,” she says. “Shall we take some time for you to generate some questions?”

Leila’s and Oscar’s students left that meeting with a plan. It started with a protocol they had used many times in their academic courses: producing their own questions, improving those questions, and then strategizing how to use them.
In this case, the question they came up with was “What do our families need to know for us to succeed in college?”

They came up with the idea to organize an assembly in which recent graduates would come and speak with current students and their parents about the obstacles to college and the ways to overcome them. They planned to conduct a survey of their peers about the college access issues they were facing. The next day, they asked for a meeting with the guidance counselor and the principal. The next month, they analyzed the data they had gathered and prepared a presentation in both Spanish and English. Two months later, they were on the stage of a crowded auditorium, speaking to an audience of parents and peers. By turning their ideas into action, they became agents of change in their own lives, their school, and their community.

These two teachers work in a school that takes seriously its commitment to accessing student voices. For some years, its leadership has recognized that everyone wants a school that brings out the best in both young people and adults. After years of patient work, everybody can see the results in action. For example:

- Students are now routinely included in formal planning and their perspectives and ideas show up in both policy and practice.
- Classroom teachers and students participate in a mid-semester formative assessment of how they are meeting their shared responsibility for a productive learning environment.
- The curriculum includes an elective course in youth leadership offered every semester for social studies credit, and students from the higher grades act as teaching assistants.

Joaquin, the principal here for five years now, graduated from the city’s public schools himself; he can remember pushing back against adults in his own youth. Now he starts every academic year by asking faculty to reflect on the moments when they began to cross the line from childhood into adulthood.

“That transition is what we’re here for,” he always tells his staff. “How are we going to support those growing-up moments in the life of every single student in the school?”

Joaquin began a push to make allies of students who were not recognized leaders in the school, rather than recruiting only those who fit the standard mold. He pulled together a group of young male students who often had roles in the school’s disciplinary incidents. They meet in the gym’s weight room every morning before school. “There’s no agenda,” he said. “We just lift. Pretty cool. I’m doing a lot of listening. They’ve got a lot to say.”

He grinned. “We’ve started calling our group the Revolutionary Leaders. I want them to be the ones who turn that suspension rate around.”

**Overview**

The most important partners in the mission of any school are its students. If their schools do not hear their voices, respect their perspectives, and use their energies, young people will ally themselves with some other group that does. A profound gap may then open between the adults’ school and that of the kids — two cultures (or more) in an uneasy tension that invites continual repression and resistance. On the other hand, when educators trust students to help construct and shape their learning environment, they support students’ growing agency and engagement.

Although this book is about designs, accessing student voices is really more of a mindset, perspective, or attitude on the part of everybody in the building. It requires practice in inviting and asking questions, listening closely, building trust and respect, and taking action with students. It requires more than just individual ideas and initiatives like those of Leila, Oscar, and Joaquin.

This chapter is based on the work of the nonprofit What Kids Can Do (WKCD), which centers on the learning of youth between the ages of 12 and 24. WKCD has documented the successful efforts of educators who integrated student voices into the most important work of their schools. Like WKCD, this chapter aims:

- To promote the habit of consulting students on matters affecting their schooling;
- To stimulate productive youth-adult discourse and action regarding their learning environment; and
- To provide mutually respectful protocols for accessing and acting on student input.

These purposes serve both the driving forces of adolescent development and the interests of the school. Adolescents have a pressing need to establish identity, agency,
CHAPTER 1 ■ ACCESSING STUDENT VOICES

History of Student Voice

Since John Dewey first advocated for democracy in education (1916), educators and youth have pressed for active participation by students in matters affecting their schooling. In 1959, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child declared that those under eighteen have the right to express their opinions and to have those opinions heard and acted upon when appropriate (United Nations, 1960). The 1960s and 1970s saw the “student power” movement emerge among the youth of that politicized generation. By the turn of the 21st century, efforts to involve students more directly in school decisions had increased significantly and a new body of academic research was exploring its effects.

Varieties of student voice

Adults in school often hold a range of attitudes and expectations when they propose to access student voice. For example, they may regard student voice as:

• Opportunities for youth to express their perspectives, providing data to school leaders (e.g. via surveys, focus groups, consultations, or other feedback protocols);

• Students’ formal participation, partnership, and shared responsibility and accountability with adults in making and carrying out decisions; and

• Students’ direct leadership in deciding, designing, and implementing change efforts, with adults as mentors, guides, and resource providers.

Toshalis and Nakkula (2013) have described this as a spectrum of student-voice-oriented activity (see Figure 1 on p. 50), most of which takes place toward the “expression” end rather than the “leadership” end (p. 195).

As the activity grows more toward partnership, activism, and leadership, it poses increasing challenges to the adult power structure. The need arises to develop capacity among both youth and adults, including providing time and resources for rich conversations about the principles, values, and practical implications of such adult-youth collaborations.

Learning to Listen

This chapter concerns itself not just with accessing student voice (that is, how to get students talking with adults) but learning to listen to students in ways that both acknowledge and promote their role as a transformative force in education. As Michael Fielding (2001) has pointed out, this involves not just the skills of respectful dialogue but also complicated issues of how adults and students...
regard and behave with each other in their daily encounters. In addition, organizational systems, routines, and spaces (such as the details of who meets when, where, and why) send signals to students about whether their perspectives are taken seriously.

Let’s leave it to this high school student named RaShawn to describe the positive results he saw as his school began to make that process their own:

When adults give us more responsibility than they usually would — other people might call it challenging us — they show that they trust us to accomplish it. Giving us more say in our education means that they think we’re capable. They trust us to make the right decisions about our learning, about our daily experiences at school. That would be a huge benefit to the entire student body, rather than a liability for the administration.

**Rationale**

Whatever adults are working on in a school, it goes better when they regard students as stakeholders and change agents. Research and on-the-ground experience make clear the rewards in key areas such as classroom behavior, school climate and culture, school restructuring, community connections, and student achievement (Fielding, 2001). Even more critical, student voice is closely linked with young learners’ sense of agency, affecting their motivation and

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**Figure 1: The Spectrum of Student Voice-Oriented Activity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Consultation</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Partnership</th>
<th>Activism</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering opinions, creating art, celebrating, complaining, praising, objecting</td>
<td>Being asked for their opinion, providing feedback, serving on a focus group, completing a survey</td>
<td>Attending meetings or events in which decisions are made, frequent inclusion when issues are framed and actions planned</td>
<td>Formalized role in decision making, standard operations require (not just invite) student involvement, adults are trained in how to work collaboratively with youth partners</td>
<td>Identifying problems, generating solutions, organizing responses, agitating and/or educating for change both in and outside of school contexts</td>
<td>(Co-) Planning, making decisions and accepting significant responsibility for outcomes, (co-) guiding group processes, (co-) conducting activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most student voice activity in schools/classrooms resides at this end of the spectrum.

The need for adults to share authority, demonstrate trust, protect against co-optation, learn from students, and handle disagreement increases from left to right. Students’ influence, responsibility, and decision-making roles increase from left to right.

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engagement and their growth in cognitive, behavioral, and social-emotional domains (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Professional learning that focuses on accessing student voices can help educators integrate into their daily practice the engagement of students in powerful learning and purposeful action.

Some school leaders routinely access student voices so they can align policies, practices, and programs with the interests and needs of youth. Their efforts take place on a spectrum of activities along which the roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority of students grow (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2013). For example, even the opportunity to express their views or give feedback on school or classroom decisions increases young people’s sense of ownership, attachment, membership, and agency (Mitra, 2009b; Rudduck, Demetriou, & Pedder, 2003). When their involvement extends to larger issues (for example, participation in the teacher evaluation process, or action on community issues that affect the school), it has positive effects on both the effort itself and students’ development as leaders (Levin, 2000; Mitra & Gross, 2009).

Youth, practitioners, and researchers alike have noted that many actions intended to bring students to the table fall flat. Their purpose and process may tokenize student voice and participation or limit their responsibility for governance. For example, a student council often primarily exists to plan social events like proms and pep rallies. Efforts grounded in a mutually respectful inquiry process regard students’ experiences, perspectives, participation, and leadership as indispensable.

**Steps**

Students do not typically think of school in terms of design. They come to school because they have to. They come to see their friends. They know they had better come if they want to do well in life. And, if at school they find adults who acknowledge them as interesting people and help them try new things, they also come to work side by side with those adults and to learn the habits they will live by.

When educators create the conditions for that to happen, they gain an invaluable asset in the work of the school. For young people themselves, it will make all the difference in developing the crucial sense of agency that will carry them forward into a productive adult life. Both those two enormous benefits will depend on adult members of the school community listening well to students’ voices, especially in the adolescent years.

What helps youth talk thoughtfully with us about their learning environments? How can schools make a habit of bringing them to the table? How can adults avoid trivializing their input? Here are six steps that What Kids Can Do found essential for accessing student voices as it documented the successful efforts of educators who integrated student voices into the most important work of their schools.

As you and your students follow these steps or develop your own and share them with others in collegial conversations, slowly but surely, you will be transforming the culture of your school.

**Step 1: Bring in all kinds of students**

Each school may have a different profile, but all schools have students who arrive with unique characteristics and challenges. When educators want to access student voices, they are usually tempted to go right to the ones who are already easiest to work with: high academic achievers, athletes, popular kids who speak out and stand up readily to lead.

Those students make an important contribution, for sure. But at least as much as educators need them to invest in the adult and student partnership, they need students who struggle academically. They need kids who seem alienated or apathetic. They need shy students and those who act out and get in trouble. They need students who never speak up at all.

With the exquisite social consciousness of “who’s in” and “who’s out,” some students step up to lead their peers in ways that compromise the culture of the school, such as skipping school, fighting, or bullying. Others, marginalized by their differences, do their best to disappear. Whoever they are, whatever their individual circumstances, educators need to access the voices of them all: artistic types, computer geeks, LGBT youth, English language learners, disabled students, everyone.

Building relationships one by one will make that happen. Every student in the school must have at least one adult who knows the student very well. Whatever you do to get there — convening advisory groups, looping with the same students through two or more years, team-teaching...
to reduce the student load, making home visits — the goal is for all students to feel that someone is listening and that they can speak the truth. Getting to know students’ personal stories — where they come from, where they live, their aspirations, dreams, challenges, and barriers — is the single most important strategy to reach that goal.

On the wall of a faculty room, staff members in one school posted a large chart bearing the name of every student in the school. With highlighter pens, staff members marked a student’s name if they knew that student well. Within a week, teachers realized that many students were unknown in a meaningful way to anyone. Their next steps were clear to all. Day by day, as teachers went out of their way to seek out and make connections with “invisible” students, the weak links in this school’s culture began to strengthen.

Many classroom teachers make connections with their students by giving out a simple questionnaire at the start of any course. While gathering information on their prior experience with the material, the survey also invites sharing of information, concerns, attitudes, and potential obstacles to engagement. It is an important step in building relationships in the service of learning (see Online Resource 1.1: Student questionnaire for motivation & mastery).

By staying aware of what students are thinking, both the positive and negative, school adults create a culture that lends itself to collaboration with youth. Ways that schools cast the net wide to engage students include:

- Advisory groups;
- Student questionnaires at the start of a course, asking about students’ interests, concerns, expertise, and life outside school;
- Weekly reflective journals in academic courses, where students can write questions, concerns, and ideas;
- Connecting academic skills (e.g. survey research and statistics) with issues students care about;
- Midterm feedback from students to teachers on how a course is going;
- Drop-in hours at the principal’s office;
- Monthly grade-level meetings where students can talk about issues with the principal;
- Leadership classes open to all students;
- Support for a student newspaper or website; and
- Events at which students can share their interests or expertise with an audience of peers and adults.

**Step 2: Agree on a common purpose**

What’s the issue that brings adults and youth together? What problems do educators want to address with students as key partners? Step 1 will have brought you a steady flow of both formal and informal communication about student concerns. In addition, you as adults will have your own priorities and pressures. Some examples of issues on which adults and students have collaborated in schools:

- Attendance or lateness;
- Classroom or hallway behaviors;
- School safety (fighting, bullying, harassment, etc.);
- Student expression (speech, dress, dance, etc.);
- Transportation and parking;
- Open or closed campus policies;
- Food issues (access, quality, timing);
- Bathroom conditions;
- Community mentorships;
- Time for supported study;
- Access to health care or counseling;
- Physical plant of the school (capacity, conditions, upkeep, etc.);
- Student load of the teachers;
- Overcrowded classes;
- English-language learning issues;
- Student-led parent conferences;
- Testing policies and conditions;
- Teacher hiring and evaluation;
- Mutual mid-semester feedback on teaching and learning;
- Access to technology;
- Arts in the curriculum;
- Learning outside the school walls;
- Scope of extracurricular activities;
- Student social events;
- School fundraising; and
- District-level quality reviews.

Many factors will influence what issue you will choose as the focus of collaboration with students. Perhaps a crisis has arisen that school leadership must address immediately. Perhaps new information from students has alerted you to a condition you hope to address before it develops into a more serious problem. Perhaps your school already has set forth an improvement process that advances in stages through a number of focus areas.

Whatever the situation, school leadership has the
responsibility to select the focus that makes most sense, given your school context and goals. As Rob Evans (2001) reminds educators, focusing on everything at once will get them nowhere. Instead, as Daniel Rothstein and Luz Santana (2012) of the Right Question Institute suggest, adult leaders should:
1. Identify the target area of concern and its chief emphasis.
2. State it briefly and simply, but not as a question.
3. Not reveal their own bias or preferences.

For example, students and adults may have communicated their dissatisfaction with the lunchroom conditions at your school. How you frame the focus of your collaboration can make a big difference in the quality of student input you will get. For example,

**Ineffective focus:** “How can we stop food fights in the lunchroom?” By beginning with their own question, adult leaders here are dominating the discourse in which they hope students will join. By revealing their own bias as to the problem, they take away an important opportunity for youth to start talking and thinking along with adults and to collaboratively generate questions that arise from the lunchroom situation.

**Effective focus:** “Improving lunchroom conditions.” This states the issue briefly and simply, but not as a question. It leaves to Step 3 the process of youth and adults generating questions that will lead to research and action.

If educators shut kids up, they only shut them down. But when young people see that adults consistently invite their perspectives, they begin to talk more openly and seriously with adults. Step 2 combines with Step 3 to build a framework of cooperation with those you depend on to create a positive learning environment in your school.

**Step 3: Generate the right questions**

The most powerful learning happens for young people and adults when they come up with their own questions and want to answer them. However, a long tradition of teachers asking the questions has atrophied that skill among students. For youth voices to make a real contribution to a school, everyone needs practice in generating questions that prompt broad and creative thinking together.

A wonderful resource for those bringing a range of voices to the complex issues schools encounter is the book *Make Just One Change* (Rothstein & Santana, 2012). Using its simple protocols, anyone — youth, adults, or a combination — can quickly learn to generate, improve, and prioritize questions in order to plan for research and action.

Through years of empowering thousands of diverse people to participate actively in school and community affairs, Rothstein and Santana (2012) developed four basic rules for generating powerful questions in less than half an hour. (Their Question Formulation Technique took so much research that it rightly bears a trademark!) The rules go like this:
1. Ask as many questions as you can.
2. Do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer any question.
3. Write down every question exactly as it is stated.
4. Change any statement into a question. (see Online Resource 1.2: *Experiencing the Question Formulation Technique*)

Why do these rules matter so much in accessing student voices? They free up young people to ask about what’s really on their minds. They protect novices from judgments that could silence them. All questions receive the same respect. Yet the process insists on intellectual discipline: when a question arrives in statement form, it gets reframed right away.

By using this process to bring student voices into conversations about school, educators level the playing field. Here are some areas where this strategy has had powerful effects:
- Classroom teaching and learning, as students worked to frame their questions about important concepts. (For example, “How do we know how tall a mountain is?”)
- Classroom culture, as students learned to assess what they have learned and where they will go next. (For example, “How can I demonstrate my progress in this semester?”)
- School culture, as students questioned the policies that regulate them. (For example, “How does what we wear affect our learning?”)
- District-level issues, as students pressed for representation in bureaucratic processes. (For example, “What role should students play in evaluating public schools?”)

Once educators have agreed on clear questions about the issues that matter in classrooms and schools, they are far better equipped for the next step, coming to solutions together.
Step 4: Engage with youth in problem solving

What do we know and from what sources do we know it? What do we still need to know? How can we find out? What new questions do we have? What next steps can we try? (Lieber, 2009). As students take up a question, identify and build on what they know, test their ideas, work with evidence, and revise their views, they will be acquiring content knowledge as well as critical thinking skills.

That is one big reason that accessing student voices matters so much in schools. It aligns perfectly with the intellectual goals and academic behaviors that form the core of a good school’s curriculum and instruction.

Of course, youth will inevitably have ideas that adults may not agree with.

“Something as simple as allowing kids to wear hats can make a big difference in how students feel about school,” one student told What Kids Can Do. “They say wearing hats disrupts class. Other things disrupt class, like cell phones and bringing food into class, but not hats.”

To some adults, remarks like this might seem like a complaint from youth intent on resisting authority. But adults can also see the hat problem as exactly the kind of problem-solving that they want to see students take up: non-routine, multi-dimensional, dynamic, and (at least partly) open-ended. To address a problem like the hat problem would require youth to develop critical thinking and executive skills like these:

- Sizing up situations;
- Examining assumptions;
- Finding information;
- Coordinating actions; and
- Knowing when to seek help.

Young people’s capacity for flexibility and negotiation also grows from the give and take that results. When they offer their ideas, youth and adults will have to go back together to consider their options, agree on a plan, put it into action, evaluate the results, and revisit the issue for the next cycle of problem-solving.

As adults model and support that process, adolescents develop the crucial sense of agency — the initiative and capacity to act in a desired direction or toward their desired goals. Their attachment and feeling of belonging to the school community grows with every opportunity students have to act as agents of change in their own learning environment.

And as every educator knows, new problems will be presenting themselves every day. It’s just part of the life of a school.

Step 5: Make student opinions public

Educators access student voices in many contexts, including quiet spaces where individual students share their experiences with their teachers and mentors. Many good things come from such one-to-one communication. However, when youth perspectives gain traction with a larger audience, students begin to see themselves even more as agents of change.

In 2006, students in a leadership class at an urban high school in Boston had an idea for a video project. They had noticed that their peers in nearby suburban schools had better teachers, more interesting classes, and a far better record of going on to college. They proposed to go into those schools and interview students and teachers to find out why — and to prompt changes at their own school. The 12-minute video they produced has now been used many hundreds of times by schools around the country as food for thought about the “opportunity gap” that low-income youth routinely experience. In a related research interview for What Kids Can Do, two young people described their perceptions as follows:

Bobb: They expect us to go far enough that we graduate, but I don’t think they have too many high hopes. Like, “Oh yeah, I know he’s going to go to Harvard one day, he’s going to be great.” I don’t think they have those kinds of expectations of us.

Mekiesha: In our school, it’s more or less, you finish with high school, are you going to get a job, are you going to join the military, there must be other options out there for you besides college. And that’s wrong. It’s wrong when your teachers are not motivating you to go on, and above.

Educators can open the door to those wider opportunities in several ways, such as encouraging students to reach out to other students, to reach out to the school community, or to report to the larger community.

Students can reach out to other students. Let the students set the parameters on what’s appropriate for a public discourse. That will lead to them taking more responsibility and an even deeper discussion about rights and responsibilities.
Once students trust that they really are at the table with adults, they will make fair deals.

For example, one principal asked students to form a task force that would come up with a new dress code for their school. Students said they appreciated being part of the process of creating the rules. “Give us a chance to do away with the rules that don’t make sense,” one student commented, “and, believe me, we will truly honor the ones that do.”

Projects that get people talking about issues that matter to students do not have to be expensive. In one school hallway display, young people took on the problem of drop-outs by using poster board and markers to communicate to their peers how much they cared whether others came to school.

**Students can reach out to the school community.**

Students at one urban high school gave a talk about college access at an assembly for parents, teachers, and other students. Read the following excerpts from interviews in which they presented their case, and ask yourself: What did it take to prepare them to stand up and speak to that group?

*Student #1:* For many high school students, college seems a distant dream. While 65% of white high school graduates continue on to college, only 56% of African-American... .

*Student #2:* Many low-income students decide early on that they do not have enough money for college or the skills to succeed once there.

*Student #3:* Sure, college costs a lot of money. But there are resources available that can make funding your college education possible... .

*Student #4:* Keeping your grades up and preparing for the SATs and ACTs is hard work, but college doesn’t just guarantee you a better job... .

*Student #5:* There are a lot of hurdles on the road to a higher education. As long as you stay focused, anything is possible.

Students at Central High School in Providence, Rhode Island knew very well that their community considered Central to be a failing school. But they also knew that a lot of great things were going on in their classrooms. They decided to interview teachers and students about important questions — and then they mounted their own website to reach adults and other students in the community. It made the local paper (What Kids Can Do, 2006).

**Students can report to the community.** As students gain experience and confidence, they will step up and out to do action research on important community problems. San Francisco students saw school enrollment dropping because affordable housing was shrinking in their city, for example. They made a video about it and took it to the city planning board.

In San Antonio, heavy city traffic caused problems for students who used bicycles or cars to get to school. Their social studies class investigated traffic patterns and made recommendations to the city council that would allay the congestion.

As educators open their minds to students’ perspectives, increasingly they will find common ground about things that matter to both youth and adults. That process can start anywhere — even just by saying “How’s it going?” — and meaning it. Trusting relationships begin to form, and learning builds on both sides.

*Elijah:* When I look at my teachers I think about how they were as a kid, if they thought the same way that we think, what they would do about certain things like... I wonder like how... like if certain of my teachers partied or like how they were as kids, like if they were hippies back in the day or just like how they were. [laughs]. (What Kids Can Do, Inc., n.d.-a)

*Elijah:* The teacher, she would... just how she would act to us. Like she would try to be on terms with us. Like she would relate to us teenagers like, “Oh, put your phone away.” Instead of like most teachers would take a student’s phone. They’d be like, “Oh, put your phone away,” or “Text later,” or something like that. Or just you know, “Get your work done.” But not sayin’ it in like a manner where they’re sort of abusing their authority, but where they kind of understand where you’re comin’ from. Like, “Oh, you can text your mom later,” or something like that. (What Kids Can Do, Inc., n.d.-b)

In an interview for a What Kids Can Do research project, another student added,

*Genesis:* One of the common grounds is that we are, after all, teenagers. And some of them might deny, “No, I was never a child; I was never a kid.”
But they were teenagers too, and we still have common problems. They might not be the same exact problem, but problems with parents, problems with friends, boyfriends, and stuff like that. We still have all those common problems. It might not be the same specific thing, but they've been through it. So we have that in common.

Variations

The previous section contained many variations on the general idea of how to access student voices. The only elements that define the integrity of the process are question generation, active listening, and collaborative action by students with adults as partners and mentors.


Challenges and how to address them

Work like this isn't easy to do.

One of the hardest challenges for educators is to find the sweet spot between too much and too little adult participation. Too much adult involvement, and student voice loses its authenticity and its power to involve youth as true problem solvers and stakeholders. Too little, and student voice can become diffuse, exclusive, and ineffective.

Many adults harbor uneasy feelings that adolescents — impulsive, inexperienced, immature, resistant to authority — are too young to trust with the important things. Aren’t they in school because they don’t know that much?

Still, for each “Yes, but” there is a “Yes, because” that will trump those worries every time. Here are the top three:

1. Student voice is a democracy issue. Every country needs active citizens, so adults must give young people practice in the habits of active citizens.
2. Student voice is a youth development issue. Every country needs effective leaders, so adults must develop the strengths of future leaders.
3. Student voice lies at the heart of their learning. The science of cognition makes this very clear: unless adults listen to young people, they cannot build on what young people experience and believe.

That third reason offers adults a helpful way to shift perspective when they would rather bypass the challenge of really listening to youth.

Think back for a few moments on a time when you really learned something that mattered to you. Was it learning to drive? Mastering something on the computer? Speaking a new language? Playing a sport?

If you are human, somewhere in that experience you were grappling with questions like these:

- What am I good at?
- What do others think of me?
- What do others expect of me?
- Where do I want to go with my life?

These are the central questions of adolescent development, arising as young people ask themselves, “Who am I?” But those same questions are often on the minds of adults.

Everybody is risking something as they learn together around that table. For adults, it can feel threatening when students are given a voice in what happens at school. And for students, it can feel fake. Both adults and students need to come with open minds and open hearts, willing to work with and learn from each other.

“In the end, students do have power, I guess,” 16-year old Karima said in an interview. She continued:

The problem is that we don’t really know how to use it. And as soon as we start using it, acting like adults, speaking like equals, our teachers don’t want us to talk to them like we’re the same. As students and teachers, we need to learn how to use our power with each other respectfully, to appreciate each other.

Conclusion

To have meaningful effects in a school community, accessing student voice must:

- Be inclusive, beginning with the premise that everyone has membership;
- Be woven into the daily fabric of school (and reach far beyond afterschool clubs and “one-off” events);
• Target substantive issues;
• Involve asking and listening by all parties; and
• Lead to constructive action ("Student and youth voice: Asking, listening, and taking action," n.d., para. #3).

If young people are to be thoughtful stakeholders in improving teaching and learning, they need adult allies and mentors — and they need attentive adult listeners. Students find real value in meetings and talking without adults present. But the target here is to energize adults and youth together, in the same room, through conversations and debate.

As this chapter opened, Leila, Oscar, and Joaquin played their parts in creating that energy. When a whole school sets its sights on making the shift from “either-or” to “together,” adults and students both reap the benefits.

“What matters to us more than any one question is a school that takes student voices seriously,” one high school student said in a research interview. “Such a school would look a lot more cooperative. Everybody would be a role model for each other, everybody would try something new, and we’d each get to share our talents.”

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