



By Alison Cook-Sather

THROUGH STUDENTS' EYES

Students offer fresh insights into social justice issues in schools



Like most policies and practices in education, agendas for achieving social justice in classrooms are defined and pursued by adults. Missing are the perspectives of those most directly affected by what educators decide and do: students. Research tells educators how to support diverse students' learning and thus to foster more equal opportunities for school success. Methods include building teaching approaches around themes that are relevant to and that emerge from students' own lives, developing well-informed strategies for countering discriminatory and exclusionary tendencies in education, and creating situations within which students feel empowered and motivated to participate constructively in their schooling. But students are best positioned to teach educators how to construct such approaches, strategies, and situations. Only students can tell educators what it feels like to experience those conditions (and not to experience them), how and when to implement them to greatest effect, and what else might support or hinder their learning. Without student perspectives, educators have only theories. By accessing their perspectives, educators afford themselves an opportunity to learn from and with students how to create learning opportunities that support their school success.

A recent comprehensive analysis of secondary students'

perspectives on their schooling offers insight into what supports and hinders diverse students' learning and provides examples of approaches used by teachers and school leaders in different contexts to access their own students' experiences of and perspectives on school (Cook-Sather, 2009). This analysis yielded important information for teachers, teacher leaders, and others who want to create opportunities to learn from students how best to support student learning and thus how to define and pursue social justice in schools in a more informed way.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Educators who may feel daunted by the prospect of engaging students in discussions about how to meet their diverse learning needs should be reassured by the following:

- **Student perspectives align with educational theory.**

Student recommendations for approaches to classroom management, pedagogical strategies, and other areas central to teaching echo some of the principles of constructivist, critical, feminist, and equity approaches and highlight recurrent themes at the heart of what social justice might look like in schools: meaningful relationships, respect, and an equal opportunity for students to take responsibility for their learning and their lives.

- **Students' suggestions are constructive.**

Researchers in England suggest that, while it is understandable that teachers might worry that consulting stu-

dents could unleash “a barrage of criticism of them and their teaching,” they find that that is not usually the case. They explain: “In our experience, most [students] criticize the task or the procedures rather than the teacher, and their commentaries are often very constructive” (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004, p. 75).

- **Learning from the student’s perspective is ongoing.**

No educator ever learns once and for all what the student perspective is and what works for learners. Rather, educators need to engage in an ongoing process of learning how best to support each new individual student and group of learners within each particular educational context. Far from being a daunting prospect, this fact should be reassuring — giving both inexperienced and experienced educators permission and encouragement to continue to learn, just as they ask students to engage in ongoing learning.

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GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Like any effort toward greater equity, consulting students about what they need to learn is a process of building mutual trust and respect. Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) used findings from research projects in England and New Zealand to derive the following principles that educators can use to plan how to consult students — that is, engage them in discussion about their perspectives and opinions.

- **Be sure you are committed not only to listening but also to responding.**

Educators should consult students only if they have a genuine desire to hear what students have to say and a firm commitment to try to use what students say to improve teaching and learning in classrooms.

- **Be prepared to explain your purpose and focus.**

Educators should explain clearly to students the purpose and focus of the consultation, making clear how, and why, if appropriate, they were selected for consultation and what will happen to what they say, including the educator’s own willingness to be influenced by what students say as well as by other necessary considerations.

- **Create conditions for dialogue.**

The conditions of dialogue — in which we listen to and learn from each other in new ways — make the consultation productive. When educators view students as active participants in conversations about teaching and learning and their voices are included as part of an ongoing discussion (Lodge, 2005), students and adults can move past the status quo in ways of thinking about and doing school and talk openly about new possibilities.

- **Choose methods that focus on deepening understanding.**

The methods of consultation used should be chosen to

deepen educators’ understanding of students’ experiences of teaching and learning in classrooms and the school as a whole. For instance, sentence completion activities, such as, “I wish teachers would ...” and “I wish teachers wouldn’t ...” (Demetriou, 2009, p. 82) offer educators insight into student perspectives on teaching practices. Questions such as “Have you ever been in a situation where you’re learning from other students, not just from the teacher? If so, how did that happen? (Did the teacher’s actions have anything to do with it?)” (Cushman, 2009, p. 108) prompt students to draw on a wider range of experiences to illuminate their learning needs. (See Cushman, 2009, and Demetriou, 2009, for more examples.)

- **Give students feedback.**

After consultation, students need feedback on how what they have said has been understood and on how it will influence or has influenced educator planning and actions.

- **Be realistic.**

Student consultation needs to be planned realistically from the beginning, with particular attention to the time and energy needed for all phases of it.

POTENTIAL DANGERS

Following the guiding principles above will help make consultation a responsible and productive process. In addition, keep in mind and work to avoid some of the dangers of consulting students that can undermine work toward greater social justice.

- **Listening to students should not be about indulging or exploiting them.**

There is the danger in careless approaches to consulting students of seeming to attend to but ultimately dismissing what students have to say. Likewise, student perspectives should not simply be considered an embellishment to what adults already think. Even well-intentioned efforts to access student perspectives can backfire when student voice is not genuinely attended to and when students are not, or feel they are not, a part of the change process.

- **There is no single or unified student voice.**

Educators attempting to access student perspectives need to guard against overlooking essential differences among students, their perspectives, and their needs. Those committed to productive listening to and learning from students’ perspectives must work hard not to reduce students’ comments and insights to any single, fixed experience or simply assume that students can and will speak for themselves in uncomplicated ways.

- **The rhetoric of student voice work must match the reality.**

Some advocates of accessing student perspectives are concerned that oversimplifying the issues involved in changing school culture to make it more responsive to students will lead to tokenism, manipulation, and practices that don’t match the rhetoric. There must be congruence between the claims and the practices that follow, and educators must constantly revisit the goal of equalizing access.

REMINDERS

Because students' perspectives are often different from educators' perspectives, taking the step toward social justice advocated here requires attention to these differences and how to embrace and engage them constructively.

- **Be open to students' perspectives and students' meanings.**

Students see from a different angle than adults, and they might mean different things by the words they use than what adults might mean. For example, one student used the word "lenient" to describe a classroom that felt safe and understanding to her. Educators may have pejorative associations with that term: lenient as not sufficiently strict or demanding, as too easy-going or even indulgent. This student, however, seemed to be highlighting the meanings of the term that emphasize compassion, tolerance, ease of being. There are many other examples. It is essential, therefore, to pay attention to what students say and try to imagine what they might mean, rather than adhere to adult meanings and associations, and, further, to be prepared to explore such terms with students. Ask students what they mean by such terms both to learn and to extend what they might mean to students and to us as educators.

- **Respond constructively to doubts, disagreements, and defensiveness you might feel.**

Because some of what students say will challenge educators' beliefs, and because some of what they say may conflict with educators' perspectives, it is essential for educators to pay close attention to their responses to what students have to say and, rather than becoming defensive or dismissive, educators should ask themselves what they could do to better understand student perspectives and help students better understand theirs. The challenge often lies in adults overcoming their own feelings as educators to recognize, understand, and accept the true feelings of students in order to work collaboratively to build a more meaningful learning environment. No matter what students feel, and whether the adults agree, it is a real feeling to the students, and educators must work with them as all participants in the conversation move beyond their limited perspectives. Turn doubt and disagreement into opportunity for further learning.

- **Consider how to help students gain insight into educators' experiences and perspectives.**

When educators consult students about their learning needs, and when that process of consultation is a genuine dialogue, students gain insight into and deeper understanding of the challenges teachers face.

One student explained that hearing about what prospective teachers struggle with "made me realize the teacher's point of view, like, I never really realized what they go through, that they even care about this" (Cook-Sather, 2009, p. 205).

These insights and understandings make students more empathetic and more willing to work with educators to make schools places where both educators and students can work to the best of their ability.

- **Collaborate with students to identify and work towards larger systemic changes.**

Student perspectives reveal the capacity students have to identify and articulate the struggles they experience and the hopes they have for their education. They also reveal the limitations of the student perspective, particularly regarding the larger systemic structures and strictures within which educators labor. The educator's role is to work with students to allow their voices to create a meaningful and constructive change well beyond the initial interaction. Thus a final challenge is how to collaborate with students to identify their needs and hopes, to help them see the larger system within which both students and teachers work, and to imagine together more effective ways to structure teaching and learning opportunities.

SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES

Accessing students' perspectives is a complex activity requiring a high degree of awareness and responsibility on the part of educators. And yet, "given the vastly unequal educational outcomes among students of different backgrounds, equalizing conditions for student learning needs to be at the core of a concern for diversity" (Nieto, 1999). Learning from students about their diverse learning needs and how to create classroom environments in which they can succeed can contribute to such equalizing.

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