



WHAT STUDENTS CAN TELL US

TEACHERS BENEFIT FROM STUDENT PERCEPTION SURVEYS

BY NASUE NISHIDA AND HOLLI HANSON

Suzanne is a midcareer elementary teacher at what she feels is the height of her career. Her students do well on assessments and make progress on their school work. She receives proficient and distinguished ratings on her annual evaluations. Colleagues turn to her with questions, seeking her sage advice, and she often leads professional learning in her building and across her district. But Suzanne's world tilted when she surveyed her students on their perceptions of instruction and her classroom.

Suzanne was surprised to

discover that students perceived the classroom environment as somewhat chaotic because it was loud and full of distractions. While her students appreciated her one-on-one rounds with each individual student, they felt that the rest of the classroom wasn't well-managed or on-task during these times.

Suzanne realized this was something that she wouldn't have discovered through a student assessment or a periodic evaluation from her principal. Furthermore, she realized she would need to reconsider how to implement the rounds strategy, which was a core part of her teaching and deeply personal to her practice.

Suzanne was part of a district team that participated in the Student Perception Project, a two-year opportunity for educators in Washington state to explore student perception surveys and how data students provide can inform educator practice.

Through this project, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and led by the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, district teams explored and piloted student perception survey instruments that gleaned data about students' take on their learning,

their teachers' instruction, and the classroom environment.

The key lesson of this project was that student perception data give teachers valuable information they can use to make immediate changes to their practice, along with the added benefit of helping students become active collaborators in their own learning. Washington's experience was so powerful that the state invested funds to create a bank of student perception items that any teacher in the state can access to create an online survey for students.

This work has challenged us at the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession and the educators we have worked with to consider student feedback as a viable data point in providing meaningful and relevant information about teacher practice and student learning. We are revisiting assumptions and challenging adult mindsets about student engagement and ownership of their learning in pursuit of what we hope will be better classroom experiences for students.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AS DATA

Businesses ask consumers continually for feedback on their products and services and frequently make changes accordingly. Students are the consumers of the classroom. As such, they can provide teachers with invaluable data and feedback about the classroom experience in service of their learning.

Teachers often use exit slips, written reflection, and other teacher-developed ways of gathering feedback from students. However, these forms of

data collection are ad hoc and usually informal, and they may not yield information that is actually useful to refining teacher practice.

In contrast, when educators use student perception surveys about instruction and the classroom, they get specific and actionable data from students. Many schools use other types of student perception surveys — for example, focused on a school's culture and climate — which can be helpful but are often not directly relevant to specific teachers' instruction. This is why the Student Perception Project focused on asking students about highly specific teaching methods and classroom interactions.

In Washington, we culled student perception survey items from open source surveys across the country. With teachers, administrators, and survey experts, items were tested and piloted with thousands of students in Washington to meet validity and reliability sniff tests. Based on student and teacher feedback during the testing and piloting phases, the number of survey items was narrowed down and item language was adapted or revised.

The menu of survey items available to teachers is still relatively large — upwards of 70 — but it does allow teachers to be selective about the area(s) of their practices for which they seek feedback and information from students. As this resource is used more and more, we anticipate revisiting the item bank to find out which survey items teachers are selecting more frequently than others and/or items they aren't choosing at all.

WHAT EDUCATORS SAY

"Perception is reality, and my reality is now the perception of my students. ... What can I do to make a difference in my classroom so that I see growth there for me and my students feel like their voice has been heard?"

— *Christine Firth,*
teacher at Saltar's Point Elementary,
Steilacoom (Washington) School
District

"We are asking people to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is a huge component of a growth mindset. You don't have it yet, but maybe you will get it. And you will get it if you work hard. I can't say enough about the positivity that I have seen in my teachers who have better job satisfaction because they feel they have better relationships with their students now."

— *Marilyn Boerke,*
director of talent development,
Camas (Washington) School District

TEACHER REFLECTION AND GROWTH

In Washington, there isn't a state requirement or mandate to connect or collect student perception data related to a teacher's evaluation. Therefore, the exploratory project work focused on using student perception data for

teacher reflection and growth. The power is using this as a tool for deeper reflection that pivots a teacher toward making changes in practice.

Through the Student Perception Project, we have learned that surveys are most useful in a cycle: From survey administration to data analysis to reflection to action and then back to survey administration, ultimately resulting in growth. For full impact, neither teachers nor students can see the survey as a one-time event. The steps of reflection and action are the most critical — and possibly the most difficult.

Collaborative conversations with colleagues, learning teams, professional learning communities, or instructional coaches can be helpful for facilitating reflection and action. Learning teams may decide to administer a survey on a specific aspect of professional growth on which the group is focusing or an individual might ask the team to support her or him in processing what emerged from the surveys. This kind of support can be helpful for engaging in a new and often difficult form of reflection.

In Washington, the results of surveys are not automatically shared with administrators or evaluators unless the teacher decides to share them. But the majority of teachers who do share some aspect of the results or reflection about the results with evaluators have said that it has helped develop relevant professional growth goals that lead to far more meaningful, growth-focused evaluation conversations.

ENGAGING STUDENTS

For this process to work, students need to be prepared to understand how to look at what is happening in the classroom with a critical eye and provide constructive feedback. The teacher must be prepared to explain the reason for the surveys and coach students through the art of providing constructive feedback for learning, a skill that is critical for a lifelong learner mindset. When teachers take these steps, students often feel honored to

LEARN MORE

- The Student Perception Survey Toolkit is available at cstp-wa.org/teacher-leadership/resources/student-perception-project.
- Teachers, administrators, and students share their perspectives about the impact of student feedback data in this video on the Student Perception Project: www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2sEjiP41eU&feature=youtu.be.



be active participants in someone else's learning, especially that of their teacher.

Students also need to know their feedback is being taken seriously. After teachers review the results, they should discuss them with students. This can open meaningful two-way communication between teachers and students and may help teachers clarify students' points of view. In addition, this can demonstrate to students a teacher's growth mindset and create stronger partnerships with students as initiators of their own learning and growth.

As we involve students, we elevate student voice and ownership increases. Students begin to understand that they have agency and are valuable collaborators in the learning experience, which often results in increased connections and deeper relationships.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS

It's important to recognize that student perception data are often not easy for teachers to see and use. Listening to students situates teachers in a vulnerable space that most are not accustomed to. Often what is communicated in the results can be surprising, challenge assumptions, or lead to new ideas or more questions.

We have learned that translating student perception data into teacher

growth isn't necessarily a natural move, especially when the learning is deeply personal and teachers may not want to share their student perception data.

One way to shift teachers out of this discomfort and resistance is to focus on cultivating a mindset shift away from assessing whether teaching is "good" or "bad" to whether it is effective for these specific students.

With a microgrant from the Learn Next initiative, spearheaded by education design lab 2Revolutions, the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession convened a group of educators who had experience with the student perception surveys to develop a tool kit for their colleagues to support teachers before, during, and after the survey process.

The Student Perception Survey Toolkit includes tools and resources to create a climate of emotional safety and orientation to action for teachers as they seek and respond to student perception data and honor student voice. It focuses on reflection, offers advice about conversations, and provides resources on learner agency.

POWERFUL LEARNING

Authentic student perceptions provide educators with feedback to dig deeper into what is happening from the student experience and how they are learning, whether we agree or not. The critical next action step is for the teacher to decide how to use that data to impact the student experience.

There are several ways teachers are using the feedback from the surveys. One is to inform professional learning. We have seen teachers use the data to set more relevant professional goals for themselves. To maximize this potential, we have moved to regularly incorporating a collaborative processing of their results with colleagues and evaluators.

Teachers also use the data to modify daily classroom practices. For example, some teachers, realizing they need to do more to assess and summarize student learning each day to ensure all students

understand, have posted clearer lesson objectives or developed exit tickets.

Other teachers have reported that their data have generated deeper class discussions about topics such as rigor, lack of challenging material, and how to address instructional issues with their teacher.

In one instance, the result was implementation of an inquiry-focused time giving students autonomy and creativity over their own learning and

space to explore new ideas, passions, and things that spark curiosity.

Overall, one of the most widespread impacts was how teachers and students approached goal setting in a more collaborative way. The survey opens the door for a different type of conversation, but achieving results takes time and investment. By demonstrating how to give and receive feedback, take action, and learn and grow, we are providing an invaluable learning moment for students.

Asking students for feedback shows them that teachers are learners, too, and it can become a way of being that is transformative for everyone.

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Students as education partners

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before the committee. The result was the School Safety and Resiliency Act, which passed its final reading after adopting an amendment that was a behind-the-scenes nod to our work: a stipulation that students are represented as required school safety plans are developed.

Additional, powerful examples of young people shaping important public conversations in Kentucky include:

- A group of our members at one high school concerned about the rollout of metal detectors and security officers there surveyed 600 peers to ascertain the impact of the new measures. The results showed that, while a majority felt that the measures made them physically safer, a distinct minority said they prompted new fears and created a prison-like atmosphere. The team then shared the data with teachers and administrators to prompt a larger discussion about the need to focus on more alienated students.
- After leading a study to measure the extent of sexual harassment in high school, a member of our team formed a nonprofit dedicated to sexual harassment education. The results were picked up by the local and national press, and she is now

developing materials to train students to address the problem in their schools.

- Other members of our team conducted a study about mental health stigmatization in schools and founded a nonprofit dedicated to mobilizing students to educate peers on a range of mental health issues. The group works with mental health professionals and hosts an annual summit for students from throughout the state.
- And yet another member affiliated with our team is embarking on a second year of coordinating a statewide, bipartisan campaign to ban corporal punishment in the 17 Kentucky school districts that still practice it.

Our team members also serve as informed spokespeople for scores of news media covering school safety, and we have published several op-eds in all of the state's major newspapers.

LEARNING TOGETHER

In just a few short years, between attending classes, taking tests, doing homework, and everything else being full-time students entails, our team has had an outsized impact beyond the classroom. Between them, members have generated 60 op-eds, led 165 local

and national presentations, produced three policy reports, organized three statewide capitol rallies, created a blog and a podcast, and even published a book.

Our entire process is a shift in power. It positions educators and students to not only learn together from gathering and interpreting data but also collaborate to enact and assess solutions. We ask educators to remember that students are capable of much more than planning dances and bake sales. Rather than asking for student opinions after decisions have been made, we implore educators to consult students from the beginning.

We know it's easier said than done, but it can be done. Enlisting students as education improvement partners at the school, district, and state levels engages students in the civic life of schools and communities. It demonstrates what it can look like when we support students to do democracy in addition to studying it.

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