



Equity work brings student voices to the table

BY AMY COLTON, JANICE BRADLEY, AND DEB RADI

Have you ever had one of those moments when you hit your head with your palm and say, “Duh! How did I not see that before?” The board of the Learning Forward Foundation had one of those moments recently when we realized our equity work had been missing an essential perspective: students.

The foundation board members have been on a collaborative learning journey about how to build the capacity of educators to establish equitable

learning environments that meet the needs of all students.

Our quest for understanding has included many steps, like book studies, learning from the lived experiences and insights of equity leaders, and ongoing dialogue with each other. In all this work, how had we overlooked students’ voices? How could we have thought that only adults know what’s best for students?

We realized that instead of doing *to* students, we needed to work *with* them.

We committed to incorporating student voice, which Dana Mitra (2006) defined as “the many ways in which youth might have the opportunity to participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers.”

She went on to point out the importance of shared ownership with students: “Student voice opportunities allow students to work with teachers and administrators to co-create the path of reform, it enables youth to meet their

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own developmental needs, and it can strengthen student ownership of the change process.”

The board’s summer retreat provided an opportunity to bring student voices to the table. Each session began with listening to and learning from students. Students told how educators developed meaningful and collaborative relationships with them, engaged in conjoint learning with them, and encouraged them to build their own identity as active, engaged learners.

They described the ways adults facilitated and supported their engagement in issues of social justice and equity within their communities and helped them develop a sense of belonging within educational reform initiatives aimed at equity for all.

Inspired by the voices of students, the foundation is exploring how to design professional learning that results in educators valuing the identities, backgrounds, and perspectives of students. Our goal is for educators to develop the skills to create learning spaces where adults listen to, collaborate with, and encourage leadership from students.

We started by reflecting on the student conversations and asking, “What conditions did educators establish that enabled such powerful

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experiences and outcomes for students?” We uncovered three themes:

- Teachers and administrators established safe and supportive spaces for deep learning and relationship building.
- Students collaboratively engaged with adults and their peers around authentic and relevant issues.
- Adults encouraged and enabled student ownership of ideas and actions, providing support only as needed.

Professional learning facilitators need to create similar conditions for educators so that they can experience the empowerment and ownership that we want them, in turn, to create for students. Collaborative, inquiry-based professional learning that is well-facilitated and supported aligns with the learning spaces the students experienced.

Going forward, we plan to center student voices in our work for social justice and equitable education, and we encourage other educators to do the same. When we bring student voices to the table, students become the catalysts to inspire the change we all need.

REFERENCE

Mitra, D.L. (2006). Student voice or empowerment? Examining the role of school-based youth-adult partnerships as an avenue toward focusing on social justice. *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, 10, 22.

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