Opening the Floodgates: giving students a voice in school reform

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In the first of our two contributions from North America, Dana Mitra, a doctoral student at the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, Stanford University, USA helps us to understand some of the complexities and challenges, as well as the excitement and satisfaction, of students conducting research into things that matter to them about their daily experience of schooling. Echoing some of the issues coming out of Marcia Preito’s work, one of the most heartening and compelling is the emergence of a new awareness of the reciprocal nature of learning, of how students and teachers can learn with and from each other. Email contact: dmitra@leland.stanford.edu

How can high schools improve outcomes for students? While many schools have struggled with how to improve student outcomes, two high schools in the United States have decided to go straight to the source. They ask the students.

On a summer day in northern California, the fog rolls across the sky above the sprawling campus of Seaquest High. Most teenagers are at their summer jobs in this bedroom community containing a mix of working- and middle-class students from primarily Caucasian, Filipino, and Latino backgrounds. But today four students are back at school. They sit in a circle called “fishbowl.” Teachers sit in a bigger circle outside the student fishbowl watching intensely and taking notes.

• The adult facilitator, a teacher in the school, asks the students, “What works and what doesn’t work that teachers do to help students learn?”

• The room remains quiet for a good minute until a student responds, “In a lot of my classes, the smart people raise their hands, and they always listen to them more than the people who barely raise their hands.”

• Adds another student, “Often there might be favoritism in some cases. Like you could have one student who comes in late but does his work but he won’t get in trouble. Another comes in who doesn’t do all this work but enough to pass and he’ll get in more trouble.”

• A third student admits, “Some teachers gave up on me instead of encouraging me. I think they gave up on me because I gave up.”

• The facilitator waits for all responses and then asks another question: “How do you learn best?” Students respond more quickly to this question. “I need to see it, act it out, you know?”

• Another student chimed in, “I learn a lot better from people who sit next to me than the teacher. The teacher puts me near all the people who earn good grades and the people who are passing. I learn from them.”

• Two other students nod in agreement.

A member of a privately-funded reform effort called the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), Seaquest received a large amount of funding—$250 per student for five years—to identify and work to improve an issue of concern at their school. Unlike many reform efforts that prescribe a change, BASRC encourages schools to examine their own contexts to determine what changes are best for their communities. As was the case for many secondary schools in the area, Seaquest examined the question of whether a large percentage of students in their first two years of secondary school (ages 14 and 15) were failing classes.

Considering what data would be most informative for deciding how to improve their school, Seaquest teachers and administrators decided that asking failing students why they believed they were unsuccessful was a critical step to understand how to reach these youth. They invited students who in the previous year had received at least three D’s or F’s to participate in a focus group during a summer staff-training. The students in the fishbowl were asked to speak truthfully to help their teachers understand how they might make the school a better place to learn. When asked to explain why some students do not succeed in school, the students in their own words talked about differences in learning styles, needing additional counseling and tutoring, and having a sense of mutual respect between teachers and students. Their responses provided teachers with specific reform issues to target in the upcoming year.

Seaquest found that increasing student voice made sense for a number of reasons. First, student voices gave a clearer picture of the reasons that students struggle in school and calls into question the assumption that failing students don’t care about their future. When given the chance, these students at risk of dropping out of school spoke articulately and compassionately about what prevents them from succeeding at school. A teacher present at the focus groups described the student responses as “very honest, very serious, their chance to contribute. They were careful to say what they really felt. They were not trying to mislead us. They weren’t saying what we thought we wanted them to say. I was in awe.”

Seaquest also discovered a sense of powerlessness felt by both teachers and students to improve student outcomes. The reform leadership at Seaquest also surveyed the teachers to see why they believed students were failing in large numbers. The list was remarkably different from that given by the students. The top two answers from
teachers were motivation (30% of responses) and attendance (16.5%). In focus groups, students of all backgrounds and academic tracks pointed to specific problems with the school as the basis of the failure of many classmates, rather than locating their difficulties in themselves or their neighborhoods as did many of their teachers. By not involving students, particularly those who are failing subjects or rarely attending school, it is easy to shift the blame of failure to these students rather than looking at problems with the school’s structure and culture. As a result of this difference in perspectives, often students and teachers blame each other rather than working together to improve teaching and learning.

While teachers can speculate about why students are failing or how students learn best, schools in the United States rarely work with students to understand the problems within their schools. Often student leadership is limited to planning school dances or raising funds for school activities. The experience of Seacrest high school demonstrates the potential benefits of involving youth—those who experience the school daily—in the process of improving in the school.

Students with Teachers to Read the Currents

When Whitman High School joined the BASRC reform effort, they also decided to ask students from a range of ethnicities, social groupings, and academic performance what needed to be improved in the school for them to be successful. Located in a working-class community, half of Whitman’s students are English Language Learners and half qualify for public students. The school graduates just over half (57%) of the students that start at Whitman as ninth graders (14 year olds).

What was different about Whitman’s process compared to Seacrest is that in addition to sharing their opinions of the school, these youth also conducted the analysis of the data. Rather than the teachers interpreting the students’ comments, the students themselves reviewed the transcripts. They found that Whitman students continuously raised five concerns that they most felt needed to be improved in the school.

Improved school reputation. The students did not want to feel ashamed of their school.

Classes based on similar ideas/material. The students wanted coherence in their education. For example, they expected that their 10th grade math class would build upon the concepts learned in ninth grade.

Better communication between staff and students. Great animosity existed between teachers and students at Whitman, reported the students. They strongly felt that this tension needed to be changed into positive relationships.

Better/higher quality of teaching; higher standards. Teachers needed to teach better and they also needed to expect more of their students.

Better counseling and support. Students felt that they did not receive sufficient support when making decisions about what to do after they graduated from Whitman, whether it be college, employment, or the Armed Forces. They also did not feel they received much support when they first came to Whitman as ninth graders, including what courses to take in high school and how to succeed in their classes.

The students presented these findings to their teachers during an after-school meeting.

The reform leadership at Whitman was struck by the difference it made having students interpret the focus group data rather than adults alone. They noticed that when adults analyzed the data, they translated ‘student speak’ into adult words that did not always have the same meaning. Having Whitman students at the table preserved the integrity in the student voices by ensuring that the adults understood the issues students felt were most important. One example is the lack of alignment between adult and student interpretation of students skipping classes. The adults could not understand why Latina students in particular kept missing class even though they expressed in the focus groups that they wanted to do better in school. The students explained that the Latina students were saying that they felt embarrassed and ashamed when they returned from absences. The teachers seemed hostile and angry with them for missing class. It was easier for these students to not discuss with the teacher the reasons for their absence and to learn about the work that they missed than to engage in a potentially hostile interaction.

Having this information helped to inform future teacher interactions with Latina students.

In addition to focusing the work of reform at the school, the student focus groups provided youth with an opportunity to learn adult roles by learning how to conduct research on an important issue in their school and present results to their teachers. Youth need such opportunities to empower them and promote socially acceptable behavior and skills. It also empowered students by increasing their ownership of the changes happening in the school. A junior at Whitman explains how participation in the focus groups and analysis changed his relationship to the school: ‘I didn’t want to get involved with school because why should I be here anymore than I have to? I don’t like being here even when I’m in class. But then I was in here [working on the focus group research] and I was like Whoa! I talk and people actually listen. That’s a good thing. Because if you talk and people don’t listen, you don’t want to talk anymore.’ Participating in the group improved his opinion of himself and provided opportunities for extended interactions that helped to develop meaningful interactions with adults at the school.

Channeling the Stream

Partnering with students resulted in struggles along with victories. When Whitman students presented their focus group analysis to the teachers, many teachers appreciated the feedback and thanked the students for providing it to them. However, the presentation offended a handful of teachers to the dismay of the student presenters. According to one of the students at the meeting, ‘A few [teachers] were really mad that no, it’s not the teachers, it’s the students fault. And that’s not what we’re going for. That’s not what we’re after... We don’t want to point any fingers. We’re together with teachers to fix the problems why students aren’t learning the way we’re supposed to.’ Students were surprised and hurt by the reaction of these hostile teachers. Another student added,

I think that everybody needs someone else to tell them their mistakes because you don’t always see your own mistakes. And I guess they don’t want to hear their mistakes... If a teacher would come up and talk to students about something, it would be different. But when the students get together and we talk amongst
ourselves and we come out with [our own ideas] and try to present it to them, they have a real big problem with accepting that. Like, ‘I’m the teacher, you’re the student, what are you trying to do?’ ... Why not listen to your most important resource that you got, rather than just do your own thing?

Prior to this meeting, students and teachers had not had many opportunities to talk honestly and openly about the problems in the school. Involving students in the core decisions of improving teaching and learning required openly addressing the taken-for-granted roles of teachers and students in the school. Student voice had been blocked before, and unblocking the dam caused a pouring forth of emotions, anger, and passion.

That summer, the school held its first staff development session on the new curriculum reform beginning at the school. Learning from the experiences sharing focus group data, students and the adult reform leaders struggled with how to create norms for communication so that students could speak honestly but still have their views accepted by teachers. To make the relationship between students and teachers productive for this meeting, the reform leader at the school took several steps to scaffold the process of student participation in the previously teacher-only domain of school change.

Prior to the staff development session, the coordinator of reform at the school held a meeting to explain in detail the goals of the session to the students. The meeting helped the students understand the language of ‘teacherese’ so that the students could better understand and contribute to the conversations. The reform coordinator explained the concepts of standards, assessment, and curriculum. He also taught them about multiple intelligences and worked with students for them to think about how to articulate the ways in which they learned best. Students engaged in exercises in which they discovered whether they learn better hearing a lesson, seeing it, or engaging in an activity. They used this knowledge the following day during the training to explain to teachers what types of instruction would allow them to learn better.

When the staff development session began the next day, the reform leader ensured that the students were seated about the room so that at least one student was at each table of teachers. He then opened the meeting by introducing the students as ‘partners in the conversation.’ This point was re-emphasized a few times. He also stressed the importance of students and teachers keeping names out of the conversation. In mixed company, the naming of individual people can create huge problems. Throughout the day, the reform leader checked in with students to see if they were comfortable with the activities and understood the work. Teachers also took it upon themselves to check student understanding of what was happening. Nonetheless, the more discussions became frustrated or passionate, the less teachers remembered to actively include students. At these times, the reform leader would encourage student participation by asking for student comments when they did not volunteer them.

Student participation in the staff development session proved useful for many reasons. The students became informed of the changes teachers were trying to make. They also were able to interact with their teachers in a different role than in the classroom. One student explained, ‘When I first came, that made me want to come even more because you get to interact with the teachers and see how they really are—not only as they act in the classroom.’ This allowed them to see teachers as fallible and sincere in making changes and it allowed them to build some positive relations with them.

The teachers also benefited from student participation, reminding teachers of why they were embarking on the tough business of the reform. Having students presented also helped to keep teachers focused on the staff development session. One teacher reflecting explained that having students at each table during the training ‘helped people to kind of stay on-task and kind of just focused them on the reason we’re here. And a lot of staff remarked just how you get a really sometimes surprising, sometimes a very insightful perspective with a student at the table, and you don’t have to second-guess what they would think. Because so many teachers seem to think ... They often think they’re the experts of how students would react and what they would think. And I think people find it refreshing.’

Rising the Tide to Float All Boats

Students and teachers at Whitman often talk about student voice in their school reform process has created opportunities for meaningful change in the school. Some students report studying harder because after participating in the school reform work they have a greater understanding of the system and what it takes to get to college. According to one student, ‘I take more responsibility since the [group began] because it was something we had to take responsibility for. Since then, all of us have responsibilities now into everything.... Before I wouldn’t care. Now I have more responsibility with my homework.’

Other students have mentioned that they have become more a part of the school community since being involved with reform. Students participating in the reform work come to school more and also participate in other activities in the school. As one boy explained, ‘Before I got involved, I wasn’t doing any extracurricular activities whatsoever. I didn’t play any sports, I didn’t hang out at the school for anything. I would go to school and then I would go home. Now that I’m [working with] BASRC, I’ve done a whole bunch of different things.’ This student recently joined the baseball team and managed the school play in addition to his growing work with reform at his school.

Student involvement also offers opportunities for changing the ways that students and adults interact. Both teachers and students speak overwhelmingly of an increased communication and understanding of each other. Teachers talk about understanding students better and, therefore, becoming better teachers.

‘I think it makes me a much better teacher. I think getting to know kids outside of the classroom is huge and is so unique, and it heightens my awareness and appreciation of the kids too. It’s always wonderful to see them be caring too. Because sometimes... the sense of apathy can be overwhelming just because of the things that they’re up against in terms of the neighborhood they live in and the school that they go...’
to. So just kind of seeing their keen awareness, as well as their excitement and willingness and desire to make things better. It's a good shot in the arm.

Even the most dedicated teachers need to be reminded of the talents of their students to keep up their energy to continue the hard work of change.

Ensuring the Flow of Voice Continues

At Seacrest and Whitman, opportunities for student voice and student partnership have continued as the schools find more reasons to build connections between teachers and students. Seacrest held eight additional student focus groups during the school year to provide additional data for revising intervention efforts for failing students. They are working this year on developing a house for ninth and tenth graders that will provide more support and extra learning opportunities to help reduce student failure in these grades. Whitman students have continued to meet to find ways to create ways to address the concerns they found in their focus-group research. For example, the students in the group have developed tours of their neighborhoods so that they can have a way to help teachers understand better the students they teach and how they live.

If reforms are ultimately changing student outcomes, it is important to value the knowledge and experiences of students by including them in the process of change and to create stronger partnership between adults and youth. In the words of one Whitman student speaking about their participation in the school’s reform work, “We have opened their eyes so that they can see us and look at us in a different way than just students. They look at us as people.”

Notes

