

Amplifying Student Voice

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Students have much to tell us about how best to reform our schools.

To improve student achievement, it makes sense to go straight to the source—students. Students can not only share opinions about their classroom experiences, but also play a significant role in school improvement efforts. But how do we best involve students in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers?

A growing body of research describes such efforts as *student voice* initiatives (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2008), projects that are categorically different from traditional student leadership roles in school, such as planning dances and holding pep rallies. At the simplest level, student voice initiatives give young people the opportunity to share with administrators and faculty their opinions about school problems. In more extensive student voice initiatives, students collaborate with adults to address significant problems in their schools. And in rare cases, students assume leadership roles in change efforts (Mitra, 2005).

Research into student voice initiatives shows that such efforts can actually improve teachers' classroom practice (see Cushman, 2000; Daniels, Kalkman, & McCombs, 2001; Kincheloe, 2007). Often termed *consultation*, these student voice projects partner teachers and students to discuss teaching and learning. Faculty members, for example, may ask students for feedback on instructional styles, curriculum content, assessment, and other classroom issues (Rudduck, 2007).

The experiences of students and teachers collaborating for school improvement at Whitman High School in northern California illustrate the positive effects that increasing student voice can have on teaching and learning. As a researcher, I observed this reform process closely and saw how it led to better instruction, better student-teacher relationships, and more empowered students.

The Beginnings of Reform at Whitman

Located in a suburb of San Francisco, Whitman High School¹ serves a community of first-generation immigrants from Latin America and Asia as well as working-class black and white families. When Whitman first launched its reform efforts in 1998, 50 percent of the school's students were English language learners, and 50 percent qualified for free or reduced-priced lunch. With the school graduating only 57 percent of the students who entered in 9th grade and with one-third of its teachers electing to leave each year, Whitman High School staff members saw the need for change. The school's reform leadership team made the unusual decision to involve students in these reform efforts.

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Whitman began by narrowing its reform focus to the question, Why are so many 9th graders struggling to pass their classes? To gather data on this question, fourth-year English teacher Amy Jackson convened student focus groups so the school could learn directly from young people about the types of supports they needed to succeed. Focus groups reflected the diverse student body, including students from all grade levels and a broad range of academic achievement levels and social cliques. A diverse group of Whitman students was chosen to develop the interview questions and conduct the interviews, with Jackson's help. This project gave students their first taste of being meaningfully involved in bringing change to Whitman.

Gaining Insight into School Problems

With the support of the school's reform coordinator and two outside consultants, Amy Jackson worked with the student group that conducted the interviews to analyze the transcripts from each focus group separately. In subsequent meetings, they analyzed transcripts across focus groups to identify any repeating themes. The adults helped by asking probing questions and providing informal assistance with research methods; students particularly needed help breaking the data into chunks and summarizing findings. But students took the lead in "translating" what the comments of the focus groups implied about the support that students needed to succeed in 9th grade and beyond.

Teachers quickly learned the value of having students help analyze the focus group transcripts. Students frequently clarified responses that adults had misinterpreted. For example, in discussing a particular girl's response, many adults interpreted the girl's comment to mean that she saw no value in coming to school. A student in the analysis session interpreted this comment very differently: The girl in question had missed school because of family problems, and when she came back to school, she believed her teacher was angry with her for missing so much class. Ashamed of letting her teacher down and mentally tired from the problems at home, the girl stopped coming to class mainly because she hoped to avoid a confrontation with the teacher.

Students and adults together identified four main themes in the transcripts as the most pressing areas for reform: (1) improving the school's reputation, (2) increasing counseling and information resources for incoming 9th graders, (3) improving communication between students and teachers, and (4) raising the quality of teaching. The students presented these findings to the school faculty. Their comments made teachers aware of their desire for strong teacher-student relationships and of the need for school improvement.

Student Involvement in Professional Development

Many Whitman students involved in the focus groups got charged up and wanted to continue working to solve the problems they had identified. A core group of eight organized themselves into a body they called Student Forum; about 20 additional students frequently came to Student Forum meetings. Adults involved in the reform effort guided this group in choosing their next steps.

This collection of leaders agreed that school climate was a pressing—and realistic—issue to tackle. With the broader goal of improving school climate in mind, Student Forum member Joey Sampson, a sophomore, suggested that the group hone its focus to "building partnerships and communication between teachers and students." Students hoped this focus on teacher-student connections would lead to greater equity for students.

As one piece of this relationship building, students took part in the reform work teachers were conducting. Ten Student Forum members also participated with teachers in professional development trainings designed to improve Whitman's curriculum and instructional practices, particularly for English language learners (40 percent of Whitman students fit into this category). Before students attended one three-day training, teachers involved in the reform effort explained to students what would be happening at the sessions and reviewed with them some of the education vocabulary they would likely hear. The students also learned about multiple intelligences so that they could better articulate their personal learning styles in conversations with teachers.

Sean Martin, the school's reform coordinator, welcomed students to the first professional development meeting they attended by emphasizing that students were "partners in the conversation. ... This is not a hierarchical relationship, but a partnership of equality." He stressed the importance of confidentiality and of keeping specific names out of the conversation when students or teachers critiqued a teacher's practice or a student's performance.

Veteran Whitman teachers commented that there was a different tone in the room when students were present at professional development sessions. The facilitators also perceived that, with student leaders present, resistant teachers were less likely to engage in unprofessional behaviors such as grading papers during meetings or openly showing hostility to colleagues. In essence, the students served as an accountability mechanism for teachers, and they expressed pride in this role. Joey Sampson commented,

When teachers are with each other, they're with their peers. But with students around, their "teacher part" engages, and they want to show that they can be on task.

Facilitators had structured this training so that students could share with teachers their positive and negative classroom learning experiences. A large part of one session focused on how to meet the needs of English language learners. The facilitator asked students in the room (most of whom were Latino) to share their experiences with the English as a second language program. Sophomore Anita Lozano commented,

Often the teacher is not patient enough to repeat what he or she has said in sheltered classes. [We] don't get it quick, so [we] don't do our homework. You said it too fast and [we] didn't catch it.

Elsa, a studious senior, added,

We've talked about having students translate the directions in Spanish. The English language learners don't know what's happening in the classes. It's easier for them to have other students explain to them, so peer tutoring and translation would help.

A sophomore student spoke about students who don't understand but just sit quietly "afraid of looking dumb." Smaller classes ("fewer than 32 people"), the student suggested, would help these students speak up.

Students served as experts on the classroom experience. They provided teachers with feedback on how they thought students would be likely to respond to different pedagogical strategies and new lessons these teachers were developing. They suggested ways to make lessons more applicable to students' needs and interests.

Students talked about specific modifications to instruction that would help them master content, drawing on the information about multiple intelligences that adults had shared with them. They suggested strategies like presenting more information visually and providing after-school tutoring. Sonia, a junior, explained that she had difficulty in one class because

the teacher was not teaching the way that I learn. In my honors U.S. history class, I was overwhelmed by all of the information. During the pop quiz, I got a *D*. ... Right after school, the teacher spent two-and-a-half hours with me showing me pictures, cycles, and everything. She allowed me to keep the worksheet with the examples. ... The pictures and the chart were much more helpful to me. I needed the visual learning.

Translating Between Adult and Youth Worlds

These youth leaders also translated education terminology and expectations for their peers. One Student Forum member, junior Troy Newman, explained that he spent much of his time at the professional development session explaining vocabulary that some students may not understand and helping make rubrics and departmental standards more comprehensible.

Other students in the Whitman initiative also helped improve instruction and assessment by translating curricular standards into student-friendly terminology. For example, Whitman students were required to take a schoolwide writing assessment twice a year. Student researchers polled their peers and discovered that they did not take the assessment seriously because they saw the questions as irrelevant to their lives. So student researchers developed new questions for the following year's writing assessment, choosing topics relevant to students and phrasing questions in language most students could easily grasp.

To develop essay questions, students visited classrooms and asked their peers what issues they wanted to write about. They then developed prompts focused on these suggested subjects.

Added Benefits: Metacognition and Relationships

After the professional development sessions, Student Forum representatives continued to work with teachers in research groups focused on learning and experimenting with comprehension strategies. These research groups met during teachers' monthly collaboration period. All teachers were required to participate, and students were included in each of the groups.

Working in teacher research groups deepened students' understanding of their own learning processes. Junior Shane Johnson explained that participating in a reading research group helped him and other students gain a greater understanding of his teachers' instructional strategies, the curriculum, and the classroom from a teacher's perspective:

One of the things that [teachers in my group learned to use] was reading circles. My teacher used it on us today [in class]. Knowing where it came from, having the background, that was cool—knowing what we were going to be doing.

Partnering with teachers to examine practice also helped students develop positive relationships with teachers where none had existed previously. Senior Sala Jackson explained, "You get to interact with the teachers and see who they really are—not only how they act in the classroom." Through multiple interactions, students and teachers recognized that they often had similar reactions to activities and situations within the school. One teacher commented,

Getting to know kids outside of the classroom is huge. ... And seeing how aware and how knowledgeable they are ... They echo absolutely everything that I and other colleagues have talked about in terms of dismay at [lack of] staff and resources. ... I think it makes me a much better teacher.

Benefits at Whitman and Beyond

By emphasizing a partnership between students and teachers, Student Forum sought to both build support for their initiatives and gain respect and understanding from teachers and administrators, which they believed was essential to changing the culture of the school. In the process, they established the legitimacy of student voice as part of school change.

A survey of Whitman teachers conducted at the end of this research (Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, 2002) found that, when asked whether student voice was a bigger factor in school decisions since the initiative began, 85 percent agreed; and 23 percent noted a “substantial increase.” In a survey conducted three years after the project began, teachers marked increase in student voice as the area in which they’d seen the greatest change at Whitman, ahead of curriculum, school structures, leadership, professional development, or parent involvement. Clearly, Student Forum influenced teachers’ conceptions of student roles in the school.

The ways Whitman tapped into student leadership and the new views on instruction and assessment that students’ involvement brought show how including student voice in reform efforts can strengthen schools. Students’ invaluable perspectives help identify the issues most in need of improvement and focus faculty on what students truly experience and what kinds of support they need. Youth also play an important role in bridging adult and youth worlds.

Participating in reform efforts increases students’ agency, self-worth, respect, and sense of membership in the school (Mitra, 2004; Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003). Student voice initiatives help any community’s youth develop in a positive direction and strengthen their skills (Mitra, 2004). To become effective leaders, youth need to participate deeply, not simply “be heard.” They need opportunities to influence issues that matter to them (Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2000) and actively solve problems, as the Whitman students did (Fielding, 2001).

Consider the words of Felipe, a senior who struggled at Whitman, particularly in English class. Recalling his positive experiences in the reading research group, he commented,

One day the teacher made everybody [in the working group] stop and said to me, “What were you going to say?” I said it. I felt good. Somebody was listening, you know?

Considering the benefits of student voice initiatives raises the question of why such initiatives are not more common. As the evidence for the value of such efforts increases, researchers are considering how to make student voice projects occur more often and last longer (see Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2007).

Unfortunately, most schools are not structured in ways that encourage student voice. Large school and class sizes and segregation by age and ability increase student alienation; pressure to prove school effectiveness can lead to a tendency to sweep controversies under the rug and a lack of tolerance for differences of opinion. Although changing the tradition of who has a voice in reform conversations is challenging, the experiences of Whitman and many other schools suggest that it’s a challenge worth taking on.

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Endnote

- 1 All school and student names are pseudonyms.

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