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Amplifying student voice: the missing link in school transformation

Helen Beattie

Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together

Abstract

This article recounts the story of how one state in the United States is systematically amplifying student voice through school transformation efforts across a network of secondary schools (Grades 9 through 12; ages 14 to 18). The author is the creator and director of a statewide initiative entitled ‘Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together’ (YATST). This organization provides training and support for students and educators, who work as partners to transform their schools. She explores the present state of youth voice in secondary schools in the United States through her experience as a school psychologist. The YATST action research model comes to life with examples of the efforts schools are undertaking. The key role of the institutional leader is explored. The urgency of amplifying student voice, despite its complexity, is justified by the thesis that ‘students are not the problem; they are part of the solution’.

Keywords

student, voice, transformation, youth–adult partnership

Introduction

I started my career as a school psychologist conducting evaluations to determine students’ eligibility for special education services. Once eligible, students undergo a follow-up evaluation every three years. I soon observed a disturbing pattern: often the primary grade student (ages 5 to 12) who had first been referred for a learning disability, next presented with confounding behavioral problems. Teachers frequently reported being unable to meet the needs of non-traditional learners. They were often under significant pressure to implement new curricula to satisfy state standards and prepare students for upcoming exams. Adapting the curriculum for a child who needed a more hands-on approach was simply not possible. As a result, these students began to falter and doubt themselves.

When I later saw the same children in the middle and upper grades (ages 13 to 18), their academic and emotional challenges had often grown exponentially. They were steadily losing a sense of worth and personal agency. Some students retreated into the back corner of their classrooms, seeking invisibility. Others lashed out in anger. Teachers described them as ‘unmotivated,’ ‘disengaged’ and ‘oppositional.’ Addressing how to help them often consumed inordinate amounts of faculty time. Most disturbing was that the children had grown to believe that they were ‘the problem.’

Fifteen years ago I shifted from individual to systems level work. I now focus on helping schools develop strategies to assure that every child, regardless of learning differences, feels valued, believes in his or her capacity to be a successful learner, and is empowered to contribute to the community. This article recounts the story of the means to this end; how one state in America is systematically

amplifying student voice through school transformation efforts across a network of secondary schools (Grades 9 through 12). The initiative is called Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together.

Context

Secondary schools (students aged 14 to 18) in the United States are founded on an industrial era model. They remain inflexible, constrained by rigid schedules and compartmentalized learning. Students tend to be passive recipients of their education, assuming few decision-making roles. Uniformity and obedience are highly prized by adults. In conversation, a student once shared her frustration of living in this culture, ‘In high school, I am unlearning how to use my voice.’ This reality stands in stark contrast to the developmental needs of adolescents – or individuals of any age for that matter. Humans thrive when we feel valued as partners in meaningful relationships, doing relevant work toward a common goal. Partnership fosters ownership; ownership sparks motivation; motivation drives learning. Why then, at a time when adolescents most need to affirm their identity and value in the world, do we ask them to become passive, obedient, and voiceless? What is the cost of this reality for all students, but particularly for those who already feel devalued and disempowered?

High schools need to break free of this entrenched pattern by amplifying student voice. Alison Cook-Sather captures the demands of this work: ‘a) changing the

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structures in our minds that have rendered us disinclined to elicit and attend to students' voices and b) changing the *structures in educational relationships and institutions* that have supported and been supported by this disinclination' (Cook-Sather, 2002: 4).

In response to these realities, I started the Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together (YATST) initiative to provide training and support for students and educators, working as partners to transform their schools. The goal is to assure that 'learning is engaging and youth are empowered' (Beattie, 2012: 1). The primary focus is on the classroom experience, particularly for those students who are most disengaged. Twelve Vermont schools are active within the YATST network, which continues to grow in scope and depth in this fourth year.

We utilize an action research model. Student/teacher teams conduct school-wide quantitative research regarding the quality of the educational experience. We gather data on four variables: rigor, relevance, relationships, and shared responsibility. These 'four Rs' are the keys to engagement in learning (Wagner and Kegan, 2006: 38). The team brings these data to fellow students, teachers, and community members, highlighting strengths, exploring concerns, and brainstorming possible solutions. Students regularly facilitate faculty meetings and student gatherings to solicit input. The team then creates an action plan based on data and tracks progress throughout the implementation phase. Simultaneously, administrators are weaving this work into the faculty's professional development.

The following example from YATST survey data highlights the action research process. Notice the puzzling gap between teacher and student perceptions.

Teacher question

I regularly check in with students to see if they are learning and adjust instruction based on what I hear.

Student question

Teachers check in regularly to see if I am learning and they adjust instruction based on what they hear.

	Student Responses (%)	Teacher Responses (%)
Strongly disagree	4	0
Somewhat disagree	25.3	2.9
Somewhat agree	58.6	44.1
Strongly agree	12.1	52.9

Although 97 percent of teachers believe they tailor their teaching to their students' needs, 29 percent of students do not perceive this to be the case. To address this discrepancy, the team developed a simple mid-semester survey soliciting feedback regarding the classroom experience. Faculty led follow-up discussions to share what was working well and brainstorm solutions to concerns. The team also asked students to assess their own attributes as learners, reinforcing that learning is a partnership. In this way,

all students have at least one opportunity per semester to share their learning experience with their teachers, and witness the impact of their feedback through definitive classroom changes. Improving student–teacher feedback is a common theme arising from our survey data.

Within the YATST network, school-specific data drive diverse actions. One school is increasing relevance in learning by promoting an underutilized independent study program. Five schools are improving rigor by conducting videotaped interviews regarding high expectations and using these to trigger dialogue with students, teachers and parents. Several schools are building shared responsibility by students participating on scheduling and hiring committees. One team led faculty to examine the efficacy of mid-term exams, prompting a redesign of the assessment process.

While these data-driven actions are important, the process of doing this work is equally powerful in creating a culture shift in schools. One teacher eloquently describes the subtle yet powerful shift: 'We are now aware of student voice and think of it when we're at meetings where the kids aren't included. We inform students in our classes about changes and explain why, so they understand. We value their concerns.' One student participant aptly described YATST as 'a peaceful revolution.'

Implications for institutional leadership and management

What are the most important lessons learned? The complexity of amplifying student voice within a youth–adult partnership should not be underestimated; the importance of quality training and ongoing support cannot be overstated. We are changing fundamental norms, values, and practices. Teachers, students, and administrators are assuming new roles. We are asking everyone to envision something they have never before experienced. Adequate tools and an abundance of guidance are needed to be successful. Moving forward without this puts everyone at risk, and students are most vulnerable. Amplifying student voice takes significant commitment and skill. It should be undertaken only if the institutional leader has a deep conviction to be a faithful guide and to garner the resources necessary to assure success.

Educational leaders must speak and act in ways that reinforce the rightness of meaningful student involvement in schools. One example is to encourage student-led faculty in-services. One teacher noted, 'the more the principal speaks about youth–adult partnership, then inevitably people will see that this is the direction in which our school will be moving and that it is ultimately integral to high school transformation.'

Action research requires trust, patience, and time, elements that can be in short supply in schools. Institutional leaders are often under a great deal of pressure to implement prescribed change efforts, in short time frames, in response to mandates. Additionally, many people are more comfortable with top-down directives rather than the unpredictable outcome of a dialogue rich, community

building process. Educational leaders must finesse this tension, protecting the integrity of student-driven dialogue and actions.

Conclusion

There are many challenges when amplifying student voice within a school culture, not the least of which is predictable resistance from students, teachers, and parents. A required shift in the traditional power dynamics can be unsettling, aptly described as a 'rupture of the ordinary' by Fielding (2004: 296).

Additionally, authentic youth–adult partnerships in school transformation are uncharted territory. There are few prototypes to inform the work. YATST has documented many of the essential steps and tools in its model with the hope that it serves as a point of reference for others embarking on this journey (www.YATST.com). The model is constantly evolving as we better understand the task by living it.

Institutional leaders might begin by asking:

- How can I support faculty to embrace youth–adult partnerships in the learning relationship, shifting a fundamental power dynamic?
- What is the level of authentic student voice at my school?
- How can I create a common language for learning and teaching so that students, teachers, and parents are equally comfortable when engaged in dialogue?

The YATST change paradigm is well captured by Margaret Wheatley, 'There is nothing more powerful than a community discovering what it cares about' (Wheatley, 2002: 145). We would add, there is nothing more powerful than students leading this discovery process.

Students are not the problem; they are part of the solution, perhaps the most critical part, and their voices are the missing link.

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Biography

Helen Beattie is the founder and Director of Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together, an organization located in the state of Vermont, USA. As a licensed School Psychologist and Educational Consultant, she specializes in strategies to engage youth in school change efforts, using research as a tool. Over the past two decades, she has taught Master's level courses on school reform and experiential education strategies. She holds a Master's degree in public health from Boston University and a Doctorate in Education from the University of Massachusetts. Email: hbeattie@gmail.com