

Turning up the Volume on Student Voices

Listening to urban kids: School reform and the teachers they want. Bruce L. Wilson and H. Dickson Corbett. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001. 144 pp.

In our own words: Students' perspectives on school. Edited by Jeffrey Shallots and Alison Cook-Sather. Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 224 pp.

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Teachers are in constant contact with students, but how often do they engage them in a discussion of what is meaningful education? Politicians talk about bringing all the stakeholders together to engage in discussions about reform, and the list usually consists of politicians, university faculty, a few parents, and some union representatives. Yet, the people who are most affected by school change and school policies are the students. They are in a position to experience and be aware of change, if any is really taking place. To date, their voices have seldom been heard and honored, but, if these two books are harbingers of things to come, things may be changing.

Students' voices are the focal point of both books, but the processes involved in collecting students' points of view are quite different. Additionally, the range of students' voices, both in age and locale, varies significantly. *Listening to Urban Kids* was spawned by an evaluation of the Children Achieving reform package in Philadelphia and specifically centered on six selected middle schools. *In Our Own Words* had a more complicated history. When Jeffrey Shultz's daughter noted in a 1995 college application essay that students' voices are seldom valued, her words resonated with the themes he had noted in conversations he had had with middle school students in Philadelphia and later with secondary students in England. Around the same time, 1995, Alison Cook-Sather and a high school colleague embarked on a project that honored student perspectives. Both Shultz's and Cook-Sather's experiences demonstrated the importance of student perspective, and they invited colleagues who worked closely with students to contribute to their book on diverse student voices and perspectives. Taken together the two books allow students to speak about the daily impact of reform agendas, gender, race, and second language acquisition in Philadelphia and beyond. Policy makers who want to know how to reach students and make teaching more effective need to pay attention to these students.

Listening to Urban Kids grew out of a study, No More Excuses, initiated by the Philadelphia Education Fund to document students' perceptions of their educational experiences over a three year period when the Children Achieving reform agenda in Philadelphia was being implemented. The authors contend that, "If substantial reforms to improve what and how much students learn occur in schools, then students' descriptions of their classroom experiences should reflect those changes. Reform, in other words, should become noticeable in what students say about school" (p. 1). What they learned is that students across six middle schools in the poorest neighborhoods repeatedly said that they liked and valued the teachers who took the time to explain ideas to students, that they appreciated teachers who "stay on them," and that they could distinguish between teachers they liked and those who helped them learn. While individual teachers could

posses such qualities, the authors were interested in what it might mean if an entire school had teachers with those qualities, and one of the schools in their study approached that objective. One of the middle schools had an ongoing relation with an R&D center and had initiated curriculum and instructional changes that the other five schools had not. Students across the six schools could cite instances of effective teaching, but students at the school affiliated with the R&D center could cite many more examples. However, if one were to look at the quantitative data coming from all six schools, there wouldn't be much difference in achievement levels. But, and it's a big *but*, if one listened to students, there was a qualitative difference in what students perceived about their own learning. They could cite examples when they were learning or just wasting time.

What emerges from the authors' study of student perspectives' on learning is that if we are to take seriously that "All children can succeed," then there can't be any qualifiers (e.g., if the students work hard, if their parents were interested, etc). Teachers need to find a way to prevent students' failures. Wilson and Corbett acknowledge that this approach places an unfair burden on teachers, but they contend that students spoke in one voice about the need for good teachers. The authors urge educators to concentrate on the school's role in supporting student learning rather than on "best practices," to concentrate on the relationship between students and teachers, and to connect change to grades, not to large scale assessment. They also offer several other suggestions, but one that stands out is to make students participants in reform. They are not only the beneficiaries of effective reform; they can be important architects.

Wilson and Corbett are convincing in their call for student participation in school reform, but their conclusion that teachers must bear full responsibility needs a more fully developed discussion. There can be little argument that teachers make the difference in whether students succeed or fail, but the authors do not adequately emphasize what supports are needed for good teaching. Teachers need to be respected as professionals, and the recent trend toward scripted programs for teachers reduce them to unthinking automatons. Good teachers can be developed and maintained if there are high quality, sustained professional development programs and opportunities for learning standards (no longer mentioned in reform agendas). They don't just emerge spontaneously.

In Our Own Words highlights seven projects in which students worked with university faculty and/or researchers across the country to talk and write about their experiences in some aspect of school life. Eight of the nine chapters highlight a different focus: issues in a bilingual school in Philadelphia, a girls' empowerment project in a middle school in Philadelphia, diversity in a suburban high school, cutting class in a Boston high school, school reform in an Arizona high school, experimenting with IMP (Interactive Mathematics Program) in a Philadelphia high school, race in a Delaware school after desegregation, and gender issues in an undefined location. In each chapter, the university/researcher describes the issue the students are writing about and the process they used to dialogue and write, but the heart of each chapter belongs to the students and what they have to say about both the content of what they are studying and about writing. The ninth chapter is a discussion of the book and the editors' process for developing it. The often bumpy road that students, teachers, and researchers had in managing the project and ceding of authority to the students is well documented, but, as the editors note, there were, "[t]he rewards of eliciting and presenting student voices," (p. 176). As each chapter

makes clear, though, the adults had to be deliberate in ensuring that it was the students whose voices were heard. In every case except one there was ongoing contact between the adults and students. In the chapter focussing on school reform in an Arizona school, contact was through the Internet via a Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network initial connection. However, the unwieldy nature of making these projects work is secondary to what students report about their lives in school. Here's what one student had to say about bilingual education:

I think bilingual education is very useful...If states like California, that means that kids with families like mine will have a hard time communicating with their own families because they may only speak Spanish while their children can only speak English And no one knows how hard it is to have a family or live in a community with people that can speak one way while you speak another. (p.37)

Another student had this to say about cutting classes:

It's like what we've talking about. We were always talking about how cutting class did this or that. But when we started doing the surveys and presentation we found out how and why. And it was real. (p. 88)

The students were looking at real issues that affected their lives both in and out of school. The invitation to document their work not only gave them insight into the issues they were concerned with but also provides anyone working with students even more proof about what students understand about their own education.

Both books, although involving different student populations, ask the same question: What can student voices reveal about schools and school reform? The answer is that they, the students, know what matters in school success. We might ask why have students' voices been unheard for so long? A partial answer may be found in Linda Alcoff's provocative essay, "The Problem of Speaking for Others." She contends that it is easy to assume that the disempowered won't be heard and need other people to speak for them. Substitute the word students for disempowered, and we begin to understand why these voices haven't been heard or have been muted. Both of these books give ample evidence that students are acutely aware of what makes a difference in their education and can effectively speak for themselves.

References

Alcoff, L.M. (1995). The problem of speaking for others. In L.A. Bell & D. Blumenthal (Eds.), Overcoming racism and sexism. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield

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