

Cushman, K. (2003). *Fires in the Bathroom*. New York: The New Press.

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Fires in the Bathroom, lewd messages on the walls, keys ripped from the computer keyboards, and trash in the halls – all symptoms of a growing educational problem that threatens to metastasize and ruin teachers’ best efforts at utilizing innovational instructional practices and engaging curriculum. While we frequently treat the symptoms, we have yet to cure this problem.

Student disillusionment with our educational system and apathetic attitude towards schooling are at the center of a crisis that must be explicitly addressed. In her book, *Fires in the Bathroom*, Kathleen Cushman seeks to tackle these issues through gaining students’ perspectives. Cushman’s work is built upon a foundational belief in students’ ability to diagnose and treat their educational problems through dialogue with adults in their schools. She elucidates the points made in her books in a recent lecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This lecture can be accessed through Boston’s public television website (WGBH) and can be found online at http://forum.wgbh.org/wgbh/forum.php?lecture_id=1732.

An introduction written by the well-known champion of student empowerment, Lisa Delpit, sets the stage for Cushman’s book. Students are at the center of this teacher-friendly text, offering their advice on schooling in all its forms. Adults can learn valuable lessons by listening to the struggles and desires of the students they work with on a daily basis. Frequently, Cushman’s book illustrates the vast chasm between the perspectives of young people and the adults who educate them, especially in how students view their relationships with their teachers. Communication, acceptance, and understanding are the foundation for Cushman’s recommendations.

Educators are able to interact with the information in *Fires in the Bathroom* in a highly practical manner through the book’s design. Cushman organizes the text in a workbook format, centered on generalizations derived from student responses to a variety of questions, regarding topics ranging from academics to motivation. Student quotes are used to emphasize each particular point. For example, Cushman writes, “Liking a teacher is important.” and then stresses this idea with a student remark, “I really hate calculus, but I really like the teacher so I really work hard and do my homework. – Tiffany” (p. 20). Suggestions for teachers are placed at the end of each chapter as a summary of the students’ opinions on a given subject. These suggestions are written in unambiguous language and bold type, stating, “**Know your material. Push us to do our best – and push us equally**” (p. 35). Teachers can quickly read and react to these suggestions as they reflect upon the various dimensions of their classroom environments. Additionally, worksheets are provided for both students and teachers to aid in creating more meaningful teacher-student communication and teacher reflection.

Cushman advocates questioning students about themselves and their school experiences in a section of the book called, “How We Wrote This Book – and Why It Matters.” However, adults in schools rarely ask students about these issues directly. Students who responded to Cushman’s questions added that they had never previously been queried concerning their perspectives on teachers and the organizing structures of schooling. Most educators would agree that students should be the primary consideration when making decisions about curriculum, school structure, and instructional practices, yet adults assume they know the minds of their students. Teachers make decisions for students based upon the presumption of knowledge, rather than actual dialogue. Practical time constraints in the wake of high-stakes testing, massively overcrowded schools, and fear of losing control, also contribute to silencing student voices. Children are rarely responsible in any meaningful way for the nature of their school experiences. Cushman’s premise in this work is that the relationship between educators and students could be enhanced through better communication. Student voices are central to the teaching recommendations offered in this text and Cushman’s work at What Kids Can Do, Inc. In essence, Cushman is asking teachers to invite their students to take part in the educational debate, and more importantly, hear what their students have to say.

While this book’s format could mistakenly portray an image of extreme simplicity, there are significant and complex educational issues inherent in Cushman’s emphasis on the relationship between adults and young people. The valuation of content over student as a result of standardized testing allows very little time for authentic teacher-student discussion. As we move towards a model of education that is strictly focused on acquisition of skills and knowledge we lose our ability to see education as deeply personal and an innately human endeavor. Cushman promoted the essentiality of teacher-student communication during a symposium hosted by Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. As Cushman states, “Adults in most schools focus more on getting kids to listen to them, than they focus on listening to kids.” Ultimately, this disconnection between student and teacher leads to two competing cultures in schools; adult and youth. Cushman advocates a paradigmatic shift to a model of schooling that respects both teachers and students through dialogue and relationship development. This lecture is a complimentary companion to *Fires in the Bathroom* as it aids teachers in more fully understanding Cushman’s perspective and previous projects.

This cultural gap between adults and students has very real consequences for schools as they seek to maintain order and educate young people. An inability to see each other’s perspective keeps teachers and students at odds over a variety of topics, including curriculum, instruction, and institutional structure. As an example, Cushman cites the different ways that students and teachers consider dress codes and school uniforms. Teachers see clothing as an opportunity to dress for the workplace, displaying competence and deference to authority. Students view clothing as an expression of identity and fashion. While these are broad generalizations, this example does cause us to wonder about the way in which teachers and students communicate with each other in order to reach genuine understanding, as opposed to complacent satisfaction with superficial stereotypes.

During Cushman's lecture, student stories and ideas were incorporated to highlight important concepts and to convey the students own wording and expressions. In particular, one student project was featured as an illustration of activism based upon students' dissatisfaction with the education they received. The subject of this student documentary was the lack of challenging subject matter in urban schools. Students produced this video in order to advocate the introduction of more difficult content in their academic subject areas. In addition to the inspirational power of this video, this student project clearly demonstrated the legitimacy of involving students in the creation of their educational experiences. It is to society's detriment to constrain student expression in its search for educational solutions. Not only does this approach implicitly render student opinions as useless, but it also rejects our most useful tool for school reform.

Common sense solutions to these problems can be applied on both individual and institutional levels. Teachers can choose to incorporate student voices into their curricular planning and its implementation through many of the strategies highlighted in Cushman's work. Broad change is more challenging, but also necessary for a collective shift in our conception of teacher-student communication and relationships in education. A systemic transformation is essential in order to ensure students valued status within our educational community. Implementation of school-wide programs which grant students the time for reflection on their educational experience and subsequent dialogue with their peers and their teachers would be the greatest legacy of Kathleen Cushman's work.

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