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What Students Tell Us About School If We Ask

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> *"Why don't they listen to us, Miss? Why do they keep saying they're gonna listen, but it's all just talk. They never listen, they just talk, talk, talk. Like they know what's best for us. I wish they would listen to us, you know, really listen to what we have to say. We're really smart, but they act like we don't know nuthin'. We have to do worksheets. They are so stupid, but because we're the low level English class, the teachers make us do them because there for a daily grade. Miss, they don't even look like us. They don't live in our neighborhoods. They're just "bussed" in to teach us. The teachers come to school and then they go home to their nice houses, husbands and kids. Like I said, they don't know us and where we come from. Man, there's nothing for me here. I'm just bidin' my time to bust out of here."* (Sam, participant. All names are pseudonyms.)

High school has most often become something that is done to students and not for the good of the students (Cushman, 2003). Students are disenfranchised, disengaged, and dropping out at an alarming rate. Many school administrators have opted for the "latest in school reform" in order to keep students in school. However, many students feel that the "new" school reform program is just a repeat of other school reform programs of the past.

> They ask us questions, you know, like stuff about what we want changed in our school and stuff like that. The principal says after he gets all the answers, he will tell us what we said. But they never tell us, Miss. Then a couple of years later it's the same old thing again. Another survey, oh yeah, this time it will be different he says. But it never is different. And we never get see our answers to the survey." (Josephina, participant.)

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Students want to be a part of their own educational process; they want to have a voice in what they learn and how they go about learning.

Student voices are still not being heard. Teachers are still teaching to "the test" (Popham, 2001). All decisions about learning are either coming from an administrator or a teacher. Sam wants to know why he does the same old thing every day in class. We come in, sit down, open our journals and write to a prompt, read a selection in our textbook, (by the way, it's old and 15 years old), answer questions at the end of a unit, and turn our paper in for a grade. Day in and day out, Miss. It's so boring" (written journal entry). Students like Sam and Josephina want to learn, but they would like to have a voice in what they learn and how they will learn.

Fires in the Bathroom, a book by Katherine Cushman and a seminal text for the development of this study, evolved from the notion that many students in high school have set a fire in the bathroom at one time or another. Perhaps it is because of boredom, apathy of both teachers and students, or frustration between teacher and student when ideas are not articulated clearly (Cushman, 2003). Researchers have typified students in American high schools as uninterested, staring out of classroom windows, counting the seconds for the bell to sound, and pervasively detached and disconnected from learning (Glasser, 1992; Goodlad, 1984; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin & Cusick, 1986; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996). Half of all secondary students say their courses are boring, and up to a third endures the school day by "goofing off with their friends" (Steinberg et al., 1996). School is not exciting; school is now just a place to pass the time with friends or to catch up on sleep from the night before. Students who feel as if school does not offer them anything, may develop resentment towards school and may eventually drop out if they feel no psychological or emotional ties to school to participate in any involvement (Smyth, 2006). As Cushman states (2003), "In pursuit of order, school and classroom rules routinely supplant the disarray of kids' questions, objections, suggestions, and problems. High school becomes something done to kids, not by kids" (ix).

While most students are excited to go to school in the elementary grades, many are no longer interested in school by the time they enter high school. School for many students has become a place where they go through the motions of learning (Brophy, 1997; Cushman, 2003; Lumsden, 1994). Brophy (1997) and Cook-Sather (2010) observed that, among other things, lack of choice in the curriculum, contribute to a less than desirable climate from the student perspective:

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> As generally conceptualized within educational settings, student responsibility is constructed as students doing what adults tell them to do and absorbing what adults have to offer. Student accountability here means compliance and acceptance: adherence to what is prescribed, asked, or offered by the adults in charge (Cook-Sather, 2010, p. 555.).

Testing accountability can consume both teachers' and students' time; there is no "real time" for inquiry-based learning or any type of learning that creates excitement (Casey, 2004; Ravitch, 2010). The Elementary and Secondary Act of 2001, also known as the "No Child Left Behind" Act (NCLB) mandate, along with the state assessment examination have resulted in many teachers only teaching "to the test" (Popham, 2001). In addition, many students who do not feel connected to school, either by a teacher, sport, or extracurricular activity, may drop out of school (Brophy, 1997; Smyth, 2006). The dropout rate may affect the morale of the whole community. Teachers and administrators may lose their livelihood because scores are not deemed acceptable (Zuniga, 2004).

Countless schools across the nation suffer from a constant divide, one pitting teachers and students against each other. Students complain that teachers do not "know them" (Votteler, 2007; MetLife, 2001) while teachers report "inadequate preparation to reach students with backgrounds different from their own" (MetLife, 2001, p. 92). Many new teachers are "isolated behind classroom doors with little feedback or help…while others [survive but] learn merely to cope rather than to teach well" (Portner, 1998, p.4). While many districts have put in place procedures to combat these feelings of isolation, it is still a reality for teachers (McCluskey, Sim, & Johnson, 2011).

So what does this mean for school administrators? Whether professional educators call it restructuring or reforming, they are developing action plans to do better. Purkey and Novak (1996) claim most schools are involved in a school improvement process. The procedure is supposed to connect the efforts of the teaching staff, parent, and student committees which, over a two year period of time, evaluate present school curriculum and practices and develop plans for the future that are focused on student achievement. However, most of the work is completed by teachers and administrators with some contributions from parents and very little or no input from students (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2010; Goldhardt, 2004; Sands, Guzman, Stephens & Boggs, 2007; Zion, 2009). Cook-Sather hypothesizes:

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> Since the advent of formal education in the United States, both the educational system and that system's every reform have been premised on adults' notions of how education should be conceptualized and practiced. As long as we exclude student perspectives from our conversations about schooling and how it needs to change, our efforts at reform will be based on an incomplete picture of life in classrooms and schools and how that life could be improved. (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3)

This article examines what school climate factors students perceive as helping them be successful in school, and what school administrators can do to aid the process. Specifically, the questions that drove this inquiry were

- How does sociocultural theory impact student voice and student engagement in the classroom?
- How does caring pedagogy impact student voice and student engagement in the classroom?
- What school climate factors do students perceive as helping them to be successful in school?

Review of Literature in Sociocultural Theory.

The present idea of sociocultural theory draws primarily on the work of Vygotsky (1986). Learning is thought to occur not in isolation but develops out of social interactions. From a sociocultural viewpoint, dialogue plays a fundamental role in teaching and learning. The very nature of talk provides for social interaction, which, in turn, furthers and promotes learning

Vygotsky. For Vygotsky (1978), the process of the individual development within a network of social connections or associations as mediated through language, activity and human interaction is the way through which artifacts of culture are communicated to other persons growing up in that social environment. Given that the formation of consciousness, or perception, takes place situated within a specific social, historical and cultural context, Vygotsky insists that "learning presupposes a specific social nature and process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (p. 88). Vygotsky (1979d) refers this to process of movement of the social, historical and cultural artifacts and collections of meanings from the "outside" to the "inside" of a person as "internalization." This is not an imitation of social realities, but rather necessitates the transformation of the peripheral realities as they are "enfolded" (1979d) into the consciousness of the person.

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Vygotsky believes that the general sequence of the child's cultural development consists of the following: at first, other people act on the child. Then he/she emerges or enters into interaction with those around him/her. Finally, he/she begins to act on others and only at the end begins to act on himself/herself. (p. 220)

Vygotsky also states the relationship between thought and language is neither causal nor direct. Language and thought are relative to one another with areas of gray or gaps between them. "Just as one sentence may express different thoughts, one thought may be expressed in different sentences" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 250). The conduit from thought to language journeys through the landscape of meaning. Vygotsky states that the "structure of speech does not simply mirror the structure of thought; that is why words cannot be put on by thought like a ready-made garment. Thought undergoes many changes as it turns into speech" (p. 219) and "thought is born through words" (p. 255).

Gee. The declaration of language as a shared activity is further manifested in the work of sociolinguist James Gee (1996) and is fundamental to the exploration of student identity formation. For Gee, language encompasses more than words we say; for language shapes and forms what Gee defines as Discourses. Briefly defined, Discourses are more than language and include our actions, words, attitudes, values, beliefs, social identities, gestures, and clothes (Gee, 1996). Discourses, then, give us a way to define a person's identity (Gee, 2001). Discourses positions or situates identities within a specific view, belief, and value evidenced by an individual's actions and words. Identities are mirrored or reflected in the Discourses in which we contribute and participate.

Gee's theory of discourse perceives thought and identity as naturally interconnected, inseparable, closely linked and connected to language. Individuals belong to multiple Discourse communities in which they reveal and disclose different identities, what Gee called "socially-situated identities" (Gee, 1996). The assumption is that a person has numerous and ever-changing identities. Essential to Gee's (1996, 2001) concept of identities as multiple, shifting, dependent on context, and intimately linked to historical and present experiences is the role power plays in identity:

> An individual is the meeting point of many, sometimes conflicting, socially and historically defined Discourses… Any Discourses concerns itself with certain objects and puts forward certain concepts, viewpoints, and values at

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the expense of others. In doing so it will *marginalize* viewpoints and values central to other Discourses. (Gee, 1996, p. 132).

Gee also emphasizes cultural and situational factors in an analysis of discourse (1999, 2001, 2002). According to Gee, cultural models are underlying or fundamental assumptions that members in a culture may share and which have some bearing on the discourse they are involved in. A cultural model is a social schema or a simplified rendering of storylines with which members in a society make sense of the world.

Words in a discourse are tied to cultural models, because members in a group, who share socio-culturally defined similar characteristics, would choose certain words to communicate, and they expect other members in a group to understand the situated meanings of the words. Meanings of particular words are defined in context in which the words are used. Thus, the use of certain words in a particular context makes it possible for the third party to understand what cultural models and assumptions the social members share at the moment. Because the human mind recognizes and builds many different types of patterns, people develop the skills to recognize and explain certain patterns in any context naturally and culturally. Those patterns that are not too general or too narrow to operate in real lives are called situated meanings, mid-level pattern useful in certain contexts. Situated meanings mediate the actions and reflections with which a person engages the world and the cultural models and theories to which the person relates. Situated meanings are often shared and negotiated between people:

Situated Meanings as a Tool of Inquiry. Situated meaning is a thinking device that guides us to ask certain questions. Faced with a piece of oral or written language, we consider a certain key word or a family of key words, that is, words we hypothesize are important to understand language we wish to analyze. We consider, as well, all that we can learn about the context that this language is both used in and helps to create or construe in any certain way (Gee, 1999). Situated meanings and cultural models can be used as tools of inquiry when a discourse text is analyzed with the expectation that a certain cultural model is shared among all of the members and that those members can make meaning from the discourse.

Sociocultural theory permits individuals—by themselves and with others—to question boundaries and restrictions and to explore new choices through a shared history and common goals. From a sociocultural viewpoint, dialogue plays a fundamental role in teaching and learning. Trathen and Moorman (2001) maintain

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that "because dialogue provides a window into our sociocultural lives, its analysis can provide insights into practical and theoretical issues in education" (p. 208).

Ethic of Caring

Students act in response to educational surroundings in profoundly individual ways fashioned by the totality of their own experiences both in and out of school (Beane & Apple, 1995; Freire, 1990; Gatto, 2001). Caring teachers provide a framework for the expansion and development of insight into this response (Noddings, 1984, 1992, 2002, 2011) in order to build a more comprehensive relationship.

The premise of caring teachers embraces the characteristics of an obligation to establish gender and racial fairness, recognizes the reality of multiple truths and attempts to give voice and opportunity for discourse to those who are voiceless (hooks, 2000). Caring teachers look at the nature and course of relationships from the perception and action of one who cares and the one who is cared for. Noddings (1984,1992, 2002, 2011) describes this ethic of care as a need—and response—based on relational ethics. The successful relationship of caring is totally and wholly interactive and centers on the value of the experience of both parties: if an act of caring is not accepted, acknowledged, and received by the one who is being cared for, the action is not whole or complete.

Engagement

Many large urban high school populations have gotten so large that students are feeling lost and alienated (interview with Alfred, 2003). Research on large schools reveals they tend to employ the least experienced teachers (Klonsky, 2002; Wasley, 2002), have larger classes and tend to serve as a custodial role rather than an educational role (Lee & Smith, 1995). The research also shows that students feel alienated and academically left out and less engaged in school (Johnson, 2001; Martin, 2009), and are more likely to drop out (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot & Pagani, 2009; Klonsky, 2002).

What happened to those small children who once were inquisitive and excited learners; what has stifled their voices? No one really knows for sure. However, as students' progress through the school system, apathy grows, and high school seems to be the point at which many students completely lose interest in learning. "High school continues to be predominantly an alienating experience for a large number of students" (Roth & Damico, 1994, p. 2). It is likely that the need for

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uniformity and discipline constrains the learning development, or that the general curriculum decontextualizes the knowledge that children acquire so easily in their natural environment (Bruner, 1962, 1968; Condry & Chambers, 1978; Dewey, 1900). Before engagement in school may be properly understood, it is necessary to reach a broader understanding of the role motivational processes have in learning.

Support for Student Learning

Schools wishing to support student learning should take into consideration the roles caring and competent teachers and school climate factors play when considering how to establish a favorable learning environment. Noddings (1984, 2002, 2003, 2011) argues for pedagogy of care that centers on relationships connecting people and ideas in schools. She calls for "taking relation as ontologically basic" (Noddings, 1984, p. 4). Many agree that caring is a "moral imperative" (Noddings, 1984, p. 5) adding that it combines both affective and behavioral elements. She recommends that teaching and schools be restructured so caring has a chance to be initiated. Empathetic education requires understanding caring as a value and a cognitive commitment, not just an emotion. Therefore, caring cannot and must not look like pity. An empathetic education is one firmly grounded on positive interpersonal and pedagogical relationships (Noddings, 1984; Shields, 2004). However, Noddings (1984) did not feel that caring involved long-term relationships:

> I do not need to establish a deep, lasting, time-consuming personal relationship with every student. What I must do is to be totally and nonselectively present to the student—to each student—as he addresses me. (p. 180)

At least four actions are necessary for teachers to establish affirmative relationships with their students. First, teachers must show students an elevated level of trust (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). Second, teachers must show students they care about the students as individuals (Parsley & Corcoran, 2003). Third, teachers must communicate to students that they are willing to help them learn by establishing a learning environment where students are not frightened to take risks (Parsley & Corcoran, 2003). And fourth, teachers must construct a supportive classroom environment, including the use of positive reinforcement, where students feel like they belong (Morganett, 1991).

Haberman (1991) argues that too many teachers use authority and control instead of democratic principles in managing the classroom. In contrast, master teachers

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make learning as authentic, relevant, and appealing as possible by utilizing techniques such as thematic instruction, discovery, and inquiry (Haberman, 1991). Coppedge and Shreck (1988) found that what really mattered to students was the teachers' human behaviors. McEwan (2002) adds that highly successful teachers realize and manage the tension between caring and control.

In addition to the concepts of caring and the student, a large compendium of literature supports the correlation between teacher competency and student academic success or achievement. Research on successful and effective teaching links teacher competency with student academic performance (Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2006a, 2010). Darling-Hammond (2000) analyzed policies for teacher education, hiring, licensing, and professional development and her findings suggest a relationship between teacher quality and student achievement for each state in the United States. Specifically, Darling-Hammond (2000, 2006b, 2010) believes the strongest influence on how well students achieve on national assessments was the competence of teachers who were fully certified and/or certified and had knowledge and skills in their content area. Several studies suggest the most reliable and consistent factor associated with student academic achievement is closely tied to teachers who are fully licensed and certified (Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2006b; Goldhaber & Brewer, 1999; Stronge, 2002; Vandevoort, Amrein-Beardley, & Berliner, 2004).

Another major contributing factor for student performance was a climate for success (Cook-Sather, 2010). Hoy and Miskel (1991) defined school climate as a broad term that refers to students' opinions and views of the environment of the school. School climate was the personality of the school (Halpin & Croft, 1963). Similarly, Sweeney (1988) acknowledged ten factors those schools with "winning" school climates have in common: supportive and stimulating environment, student-centered orientation, positive expectations, feedback, rewards, sense of family, closeness to parents and community, communication achievement and trust. Borger, Lo, Oh, & Walberg (1985) stated that "a safe orderly environment where rules are clear and consistent was the most frequently mentioned climate variable" in effective school studies they reviewed.

Methods

Three questions guided this qualitative study: First, how does sociocultural theory impact student voice and student engagement in the classroom? Second, how does caring pedagogy impact student voice and student engagement in the classroom? Finally, what school climate factors do students perceive as helping them to be

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successful in school? These questions were examined using a comparative case study design.

This collective case study used both naturalistic and positivist paradigms. Merriam (1988) and Yin (1989) define a case study as those in which the researcher explores a particular phenomena or entity, restricted by time and activity, collecting detailed and comprehension information by using an array of data collection over a sustained period of time. Creswell (1994) explains case study as:

> An exploration of a bounded system or a case (or multiple cases) over a period of time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. This bounded system is bounded by time and place, and it is the case being studied—a program, an event, an activity, or individuals (p .61).

Patton (1990) asserts that the "debate and competition between paradigms is replaced by a new paradigm: '*a paradigm of choice'*" (p. 200, emphasis in original). The methods in this case study were based upon Patton's concept of *paradigm of choice* in that the surveys (positivist paradigm) and student journals, open-essay questions and observations (naturalistic paradigm) were used for the comparative case study analysis. There is an advantage for the researcher to combine methods as to better comprehend a concept or idea (Creswell, 1994).

Participant Selection

Seven ninth grade high school English teachers, who participated in the Greater Houston Area Writing Project, were asked to participate in a research study, and two ninth grade English teachers names were randomly selected from two high schools in Harrison School District to participate in this study. These teachers agreed to use *Fires in the Bathroom* (Cushman, 2003) as a catalyst for reflection and discussion in their English classes. For a period of six weeks every student in each English teacher's classroom was a participant in reading, writing in a journal and discussing *Fires in the Bathroom* as a part of the teacher's lesson plan. At the end of six weeks the teachers' ninth grade students participated in a national Students as Allies (2003) survey.

The School District and the Participating Schools

The Harrison School District (HSD) is a large urban southeastern school district with over 302 campuses, 209,000 students and 12,000 teachers. With over 30,000

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employees, HSD is one of the largest employers in the city of Harrison. Belleview High School, once located on the outskirts of Harrison is now a part of the larger city. Although the city of Bell still has its own city charter and operates as a separate city, Belleview High School has always been a part of HSD. At one time Belleview was considered a bedroom community of Harrison, where people lived and played, then drove to another location to work. Most of the houses are older, but neat and well maintained. Massive oak trees line the neighborhood streets, creating a canopy effect over the sidewalks and streets. At the time of this study enrollment at Belleview High School was 3,237 with an ethnic population of 1,715 or 54 percent of the total population. (See Table 1 *School Demographics*) While the school remains predominately white, East and South Asian students are the fastest growing ethnic group on campus. The high school offers many school-based programs: special education classes, advanced academics, English as a second language and career and technology education. Fifty-one percent of the student population is enrolled in honors classes, and the school has an excellent reputation in the community, in both academics and extracurricular activities.

Table 1. School Demographics

		Male	Female	African-American	Asian	Caucasian	Hispanic	Native American	Mixed
Belleview	N=339	N=159 47%	N=180 53%	N=23 6.7%	N=90 26.7%	N=167 49.3%	N=54 16%	N=0 0%	N=5 2.7%
		Male	Female	African-American	Asian	Caucasian	Hispanic	Native American	Mixed
Longwood	N=410	N=109 27%	N=301 73%	N=45 11%	N=28 6.8%	N=14 3.4%	N=306 76.3%	N=0 0%	N=17 4.2%

Longwood High School is located in close proximity to affluent residential neighborhoods, many upscale condominiums and retail shopping stores; however, the neighborhood it now serves have fallen prey to urban sprawl. Houses have given way to apartment complexes or strip malls while many of the retail stores have gone out of business, and countless store windows have been either broken or boarded up. At the time of this study, enrollment was approximately 2,100 students, with a non-white population of 94%. Longwood has one of the most diverse student bodies in the district—composed of mostly lower-income just-arrived immigrants. Students come from seventy-two countries and speak forty different languages. About ten percent of the school's 2,100 students have been in the country less than one year.

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Procedures

Two English teachers in the two high schools and the principal investigators met during the spring and summer of 2003 to plan the study. The study included: a) a common reader (*Fires in the Bathroom*) for 749 ninth grade English students; b) 749 student completions of the SAA survey (2003); c) 749 student reflections over readings. The teachers, themselves, not the principal investigator, made all of the decisions, including when and how and when to read the book *Fires in the Bathroom*, whether teachers would have students write in journals, and who might make up the student research teams.

Data Sources and Analyses

The next sections provide additional information about the sources of data used in the study and the differing forms of analyses. The data sources include a survey instrument, student journals, classroom observations and focus groups. Discourse analysis was employed to gain insight into the data sources.

The Students as Allies survey. The survey, developed by Students as Allies (SAA, 2003), What Kids Can Do Organization (WKCD), www.whatkidscando.org, and MetLife Foundation was used with all three organizations' permission. This survey was divided into three parts: Parts A and B were parts of a national survey that asks students how they feel about their schools. Part C is composed of questions that each of the two high schools developed specific to that school. Part A contained thirty-four questions with response categories: strongly agree; somewhat agree; somewhat disagree; strongly disagree; a lot like me; somewhat like me, not much like me; not at all like me, or yes or no answers. Examples of the questionnaires items are provided in Appendix A. Part B of the survey contained eighteen Likert-scale questions and two open-essay questions. Part C was different for Belleview and Longwood; each school asked questions that were pertinent to their particular school. Both schools asked questions using a Likert-type response: however, there were a few open-essay questions. Students from both high schools responded to this survey electronically using the website SurveyMonkey.

This study reports the results of the survey, open-essay questions on the SAA survey, and narratives from student journals from the two high schools over a two-month period of time from September to October. The three parts of the survey took about twenty to thirty minutes to complete. The high schools completed the online survey within a three-week window.

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Student Journals. In addition to survey questions and classroom discussions, 749 students wrote in their journals during the study that focused on Cushman's book (2003), *Fires in the Bathroom.* Cushman's book covers a range of subjects, including how to get to know students, how to earn their trust, how to judge their behavior and what to do when things go wrong. Teachers encouraged students to record thoughts, feelings and experiences connected to school, themselves and *Fires in the Bathroom.*

Journal Writings and Open Ended Data Analysis. To analyze the journal and open-ended questions on the SAA survey, Crawdad 1.1, a computer software that performs qualitative data analysis using the Centering Resonance Analysis (CRA) (Patterson et al., 2005) was used. CRA, the principal approach embraced by Crawdad 1.1, differs from most other approaches, which are based on the rate of word frequency, for CRA is based on word influence. This type of analysis is based on centering theory in linguistics, which assumes "competent authors or speakers generate utterances that are locally coherent by focusing their statements on conversational centers" (Corman, et al., 2002, p. 173). By "centers," researchers refer to nouns or noun phrases that are the subjects or objects of the utterances. These noun phrases are structured by the communicators in a deliberate way to achieve coherence of the texts. The associations or connections among the noun phrases encompass a semantic network to represent the principal or core themes of the text. These noun phrases are not equally significant. Within this network, some noun phrases may have more influence than others to convey meaning. CRA measures the comparative influence of a word according to its 'betweenness' centrality. A word is central if other words have to connect to it in order to make sense within the network. The higher degree of connection or association between the central word and other words, the more influential that particular word. The degree of connection is computed to index the influence of each central word. Several features of the CRA approach fit this study for several reasons. First, CRA helps to categorize themes in the students' written journals and open-essay questions from the SAA survey and therefore derive the frames in the journals and open-essay questions. Second, CRA can compare two sets of networks to find their intersections and their uniqueness.

Patterns for nouns and noun phrases emerged (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and these patterns could be placed into four categories: self, others (peers), teachers and school. The nouns could be further categorized as: "core of self" words, how I (student) perceive myself; "others," how I (student) perceive how others see me (student); and "fruitfulness," what students perceive as helpful to their success (Gee, 2001). For Gee, language encompasses more than words we say; language

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shapes and forms what Gee defines as Discourses. Briefly defined, Discourses are more than language and include our actions, words, attitudes, values, beliefs, social identities, gestures, and clothes (Gee, 1996). Discourses, then, give us a way to define a person's identity (Gee, 2001). Discourses positions or situates identities within a specific view, belief, and value evidenced by an individual's actions and words.

Classroom Observations. Three observations took place at Belleview High School and another three at Longwood High School and included all students as they interacted at lunch in the cafeteria and common areas and in the halls during passing periods to other classes over a six month time period. These observations gave us a feel of what it was like to be a high school student again and specifically what it was like to be a student in each of the two high schools. Classroom observations added significant information regarding ways in which these groups related to instructional strategies, peers, teachers, and curriculum in a classroom setting. Being conscious of the understated and subtle factors revealed connotative meanings of words, the content and interactions visible in discussions among peers and the teacher, the physical setting of interactions and the uniqueness and role of those involved are all vital pieces of observation (Merriam, 2001).

Focus Groups. Teachers from both high schools asked students to volunteer to participate in focus groups. Students who were interested in participating gave their names to their respective teachers. Three ninth grades students names were randomly selected from both high school campuses. Both focus groups met twice and students recounted their experiences reading and discussing the book *Fires in the Bathroom*. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the researchers using both manifest analysis and latent analysis.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Multiple data sources, multiple confirmatory methods, and multiple theoretical frameworks were used in the collection and analysis of the data. SAA survey data, journal entries, and open-essay questions provided triangulation. In addition, both ninth grade English teachers participated in peer debriefing and kept reflexive journals that served as both an audit trail and a check of researcher self-awareness, cultural consciousness, and perspective (Patton, 2002).

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Results

Patterns emerged about "self," "student," "teachers," and "school" in the analysis of the survey data for Belleview and Longwood High Schools (Gee, 2001). On a positive note, respondents believed their principals modeled respectful behavior, and they believed what they had to say was valued by teachers and administrators. However, the students' very pointed, specific, and powerful suggestions relating to school and learning are the focus in this paper.

Relationships with Teachers

Survey results from both high school campuses indicated students wanted teachers to care about them as human beings and to connect with them on a personal level (72%). They reported they needed teachers who were kind and patient, had a good sense of humor and made the class interesting and fun in order to be successful in school (94 %). Students stated they needed teachers to be advocates when their voices were not heard by other teachers and administrators (92 %). Students also stated they needed quality teachers, those teachers who wanted to teach them and motivate them to learn (85%). Students wanted teachers who were enthusiastic and knew their content areas (84 %).

Community of Learners

In addition to these teacher-related issues, students also were concerned about the issue of time. Students needed time. They desired individual time, one-to-one time from the teacher. Students wanted teachers to give them constructive and timely feedback so they might be able to revise their work (74 %). Students wanted time to talk about assignments in class with their peers and with the teacher. Many students wrote that time to talk in class was a way for them to better comprehend the subject matter as well as hear differing viewpoints. They wanted time in class to actually do the work where they had access to teacher support (82 %). Students wanted study hall periods incorporated into the school day schedule and the study hall teacher to be a teacher they had during their regular class schedule (77 %). They wanted real life connections to what they were learning (94 %).

Functional Physical Plant

Students reported that both schools were safe and that bullying from peers and harassment from adults were not an issue (73 %). One school's respondents perceived their school as having positive school climate factors, factors that

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enhanced school achievement. However, respondents reported they were concerned about the culture of cheating on their campus (72 %). Students wanted clean bathrooms that worked (82 %). They indicated that an outside physical education facility would be nice and could be used by the community and students after school hours (55 %).

The students in this study identified several factors they consider positive and valuable to them. The students from both schools identified they wanted caring teachers. They want teachers to value them as a person and as a learner (Noddings, 1984). Students want teachers who care enough to give them information in order to succeed, had a sense of humor, valued the importance of a supportive classroom (Morganette, 1991), and who had good communication skills. Students from both schools wanted teachers who were empathetic and compassionate towards them (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Students recognized caring teachers create a sense of belonging; a community of learners. This community of learners provides them with a safe learning environment where they felt free to ask questions, talk with their peers and engage in meaningful conversations without the fear of reprisal.

Implications

The following section details the implications of this study. Employment issues, instructional leadership, issues dealing with valuing and respect and school climate factors and environment are addressed.

Employment

Based upon the findings in this study, implications for teachers and school leaders is such that principals must employ teachers that have an ethic of care and who can teach in an evocative and meaningful way and principals need to take the time and energy that is necessary to find the right teacher for the position. In addition, administrators need to employ teachers that have good classroom management. Students often complain about the noise level in the classroom and want teachers that have effective classroom management skills. Professional development at the beginning of the school year should have a component that encompasses classroom management. Students value competent and enthusiastic teachers who know their subject matter and are passionate about teaching it; principals should hire teachers who are well qualified—having all certifications in place with the state education agency. Administrators should hire teachers for only the positions for which they are certified to teach.

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Instructional Leadership

One area of specific interest to principals falls under the category of instructional leadership. These implications can guide the school leader towards competencies to consider when evaluating instruction or planning staff development opportunities. When instruction is meaningful, students value instruction. They value time to talk and interact with each other. Teachers need to provide time for group work and collaboration among students and should vary student collaborative groups from time to time so students can get other classmates points of view. In addition to time to talk with each other, students value interaction with the teacher. Students and teachers need to have a regular dialogue to negotiate what part of the assignment can be done with peer collaboration and what part is independent work.

Course work should be meaningful, engaging and connect what is happening in the students' world. Students from both schools value an education and want to learn. They want schoolwork that connects what is learned at school to their world outside of school. The big question students want to know is "why do I need to know that?" or "why is that important to me?"

None of us value busy work and these students did not either. They did not mind working hard, but they wanted challenging, stimulating work. Students did not like, nor learn from worksheets, crossword puzzles, and word searches. Whether in AP classes or regular classes, students wanted work that would challenge them to use higher order thinking skills. Along with this work, students need helpful, timely and constructive feedback that allows them to move forward. This feedback encourages teachers to put more of a focus on what the student is learning and not what they are doing.

Valuing and Respecting

Students have important things to tell us about their learning and their schools if we will only have the courage to ask. Students want to be involved in the decision-making process; they want to feel a sense of ownership over their own learning. By honoring their need and desire for an excellent education they can work with teachers to create a classroom culture where they take responsibility for their learning and are full participants in the process.

Teachers are on the front line when it comes to valuing student input into the process of schooling and learning. To do this effectively and skillfully teachers

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need support, mentoring and feedback from their peers so they can do the job of teaching. However, teachers cannot do this without the support of caring principals who make a commitment to student participation in the process and support teachers with mentoring, time and resources to make it happen.

Environment

Students want a safe school environment. They tell us they want working facilities; bathrooms, good lighting in the classroom and classroom equipment that is in working order. In the classroom they want the teacher to have good classroom management and enforce classroom and school rules, but enforce them consistently and fairly to all students and not to just the favored few. Above all students tell us the school administrator has an unequivocal impact upon the tone and approach used with school discipline. Discipline should be fair and retribution should not surpass the offense. The school administrators who work with student discipline must acquire a research-based approach with discipline. The focal point must be on helping students learn new and suitable behavior and not focus on the punishment.

Summary

Based upon findings of this study, the implications for teachers and administrators are: (1) Administrators must expect that teachers provide students with meaningful and effective teaching (instruction) and schoolwork. Students are sincerely interested in the quality of their school and they want to learn meaningful information. (2) Teachers need to provide students with timely and constructive feedback about their work. The teacher should focus more upon what the students are learning than what the student is not doing. (3) Principals and administrators need to hire teachers who have effective classroom management skills. Students wanted teachers to be fair to all students and not to have favorites in the classroom. (4) Students value competent and enthusiastic teachers. Students want rigorous, but caring teachers. Students do not value the so-called "easy" teacher. They actually resent these teachers more than the "strict" teacher. A caring teacher knew students' names, had high expectations for each student, and interacted with all students in the classroom, and provided attention help and support as needed (5) Students value time to talk in the classroom. Teachers need to give students time to talk and interact with each other in order to help each other out. Talking and discussing the text becomes a scaffold for student learning. (6) Students want the infrastructure at school to be in good working order; from working bathrooms to up-to-date technology.

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If we ask students, they will tell us what they perceive they need in order to be successful in school. During this study, students from both focus groups commented how they had participated in "something like this Miss and nothing happened." (Sam, participant) Several of the participants in the focus group felt their voices were not heard and therefore were reluctant to voice their opinions. "It's the same old run around and they don't care nothing about us" (Sam, participant). If we ask, administrators and teachers must listen to their voices.

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Appendix A: Students as Allies Survey (adapted)

Part A. Demographics

- What is the name of your school?
- Ethnicity
- My principal models respectful behavior.
- My school respects all races and cultures.
- Students in my school care about learning and getting a good education.

Part B. Recommendations for Change

- How often do your teachers speak with you one-on-one about how well you are doing in school?
- How often do your teachers speak with you one-on-one about your interests and things that are important to you?
- Have you ever thought about dropping out of school?

Part C. School Specific Questions for Change

- My parents are aware of what and how I am doing in school.
- I know how to become more involved in school activities if I were to choose to do so.
- I would like to see cleaner bathrooms.
- I know all of the administrators in my school by name.
- Success is highly valued in my family.
- Teachers give me adequate feedback about my progress in class before report cards come out.

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