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## ARTICLES

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# LISTENING TO STUDENTS: VOICES FROM THE INNER CITY

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*What do students in Catholic schools view as important aspects of their unique form of education? They want a safe environment for learning, caring and concerned teachers, high expectations for learning, responsibility and respect in the school community, and a clear sense of how school relates to success in life. This article describes a study which clearly documents student perceptions and values.*

No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it.

*Albert Einstein*

In recent years, Catholic schools have increasingly been faced with tough decisions, such as how to respond to declining enrollments, changing demographics, and insufficient funding. At the same time, on the current reform agenda for schools across the country is the move from a factory-oriented style of schooling that emphasizes top-down methods focusing on instruction for specific tasks to one that is intended to develop life skills. Personnel specialists from industry are calling on schools not only to teach the fundamentals such as word problems, reading comprehension, and clear writing, but also to help students develop a sense of responsibility for their learning while strengthening their ability to discard old information and adopt new and more relevant information (Sperry, 1996). Catholic schools

have long been viewed as successful in this realm, but must continually reflect on what they do well and their areas for improvement if they are to remain a viable option for many families.

Redesigning schools to accomplish this new agenda means that all members of the school community must re-evaluate their roles, responsibilities, and basic assumptions about the purpose of education (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). There is support for de-emphasizing current hierarchical relationships and increasingly valuing the opinions and ideas of the school community. The past decade has seen increased collaboration with all stakeholders: parents, community members, administrators, teachers, and students. As more people become involved in the process of discussing what schools should be, fresh perspectives emerge about schools and schooling, offering creative insights into education and problems that educators face.

As public outcry to prepare students for the real world becomes louder, more and more schools tackle reform efforts. These may take the form of disseminating innovative techniques, top-down legislated change, or encouraging changes in values related to schooling (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1993). It is the latter that produces deeper structural changes, or what Cuban (1990) refers to as second-order changes. Education is a complex system; therefore, any meaningful changes to this system must take into account the inherent complexity. Quick fixes will not last. Meaningful changes must be founded on our ingrained vision of schooling and break away from preconceived notions. Einstein understood that it is impossible to solve complex problems with the same consciousness we had when we created them. We need to develop new ways of viewing education, especially as it relates to the needs of students.

One cost-effective way to elicit fresh insights is to listen to what students have to say about their schooling. There are both philosophical and pragmatic reasons for involving students in discussions about their schooling experiences (Reed, 1997). Involving students in dialogues about their learning is consistent with constructivist teaching practices (Murphy & Hallinger, 1993; O'Loughlin, 1995). Further, it can help educators gain a better understanding of student experiences (Dahl, 1995; Nieto, 1994) and foster the creative dissonance that is needed to motivate people to change (Evans, 1996; Nieto, 1994). Students can offer keen insights into school and classroom practice (Straus, 1992), which in turn can help to improve teaching and learning. Further, student involvement encourages the development of skills needed for citizens in a democracy (Apple & Beane, 1995; Martusewicz & Reynolds, 1994; O'Loughlin, 1995) such as the ability to listen to and respect others, negotiate, and make thoughtful decisions.

There are numerous other reasons for involving students in collaborative research roles with adults. Villa and Thousand (1992) have noted the wealth of experience, creativity, and enthusiasm that students can offer the problem-

solving and planning processes. Others have found that meaningful involvement of students in their learning improves attendance (Newman, 1992), discipline (Furtwengler, 1996; Hill, 1996; Newman, 1992), and student-teacher relationships as teachers learn to trust students and their ideas (Short & Greer, 1993). Involving students in dialogues about their own school helps them to develop a deeper commitment to learning (Freeman, 1994), better understand the context of decisions (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991), and utilize higher-level thinking skills. Educational reform efforts suggest that students should exercise higher-level thinking skills that contribute to their learning (Berliner & Biddle, 1995) and that collaborating with adults about learning helps students to “develop the ethic and practice of contributing to and caring for a greater community and society” (Villa & Thousand, 1992, p. 104). Such collaboration also offers a forum for adolescents who seek adult role models (Straus, 1992). By modeling collaboration, shared decision making, and instructional power with students, educators can help students to develop the life skills that many reform efforts promote.

In this article we describe an evaluation study in which students were asked their perceptions about their schools and discuss the implications of these findings for developing school reform initiatives. As students described the teacher behaviors that they found most helpful, what they described were the same behaviors identified by researchers as good teaching techniques. This article focuses on: a) the aspects of Catholic education that these students identified, b) how to gather such information from students, and c) ways to use that information when planning for change.

## EVALUATION

### SETTING THE STAGE

Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh were asked to conduct an evaluation study of three Catholic inner city elementary schools to document reasons for their effectiveness. These schools, which are funded by tuition, the Catholic diocese, and the Extra Mile Education Foundation (EMEF), were established to provide quality education to children who live in inner city Pittsburgh. Funders of these schools asked the researchers to conduct an evaluation of these schools as a means of determining their effectiveness and making recommendations for improvement. The research was funded by EMEF. The schools serve predominantly African American students (over 95%), many of whom are not Catholic, and many of whom come from low-income families. Each school has a kindergarten through eighth-grade program and a total population of approximately 250 students. The primary purpose of the evaluation was to determine instructional and other practices that contribute to short- and long-term student success. In addition to gathering extensive data on achievement and the personal characteristics of students

and conducting classroom observations, the study asked principals, teachers, and students to respond to questionnaires and interviews about their schools. In addition, teachers provided insights through their participation in focus groups.

The study's findings indicated that these schools provide a setting where each child is valued. The schools are considered by students to be pleasant places offering a haven from neighborhood violence. Expectations for each child to achieve academically and personally are consistently high. Students believe that teachers are supportive, treat them with respect, and, in addition, help students to develop personal skills that will sustain them throughout their lives. Students believe that if they work hard they will be successful. Beginning in the early grades, teachers reinforce the importance of hard work and expect students to be successful as they progress through the grades. An analysis of standardized achievement tests indicates that achievement in the primary grades (2-4) and junior high grades (7-8) is near or above that expected, and often near or above grade level in most areas. Academic achievement scores of the fifth and sixth grades are somewhat lower, similar to national averages for inner city students. Students who have attended the school over several years have higher achievement scores than students who recently transferred into the school (Eichelberger, Bean, Lazar, Schuh, & Morris, 1995).

Many students attending these schools may be characterized as at-risk students. Over 60% live in single-parent families; 68% receive free or reduced-price lunches (an indicator of low income); and many are from neighborhoods rife with gangs and violence. Even so, students are eager to learn and were found to be on task over 94% of the time observed. Further, 86% of the students completing eighth grade in these schools also graduate from high school (Eichelberger et al., 1995).

## **HEARING STUDENT VOICES**

To obtain information about student perceptions, 92 new and ongoing students in grades three through eight were interviewed about their schools. Individual interviews were conducted by one member of the team of researchers at the children's schools. A series of 12 questions was asked about what the children felt contributed to their school success (see Appendix). Their responses identify important themes of schooling that should be of concern in any reform effort: the need for a safe environment for learning, what it means to be a concerned and caring teacher, high academic expectations, responsibility and respect in the school community, and helping students plan for the future. These five categories, which emerged as recurring themes across the schools and grade levels, were identified through a process of coding and categorizing student responses. Statements by children that elaborate on these major themes follow.

### **A Safe Environment for Learning**

When students were asked to describe their school, nearly all of them described their school as “good” or “nice,” where “learning takes place” and “teachers care.” Students viewed their school as a place where they want to be and where everyone can be successful. School offers an orderly and structured place for learning. Teachers are considered approachable, and supportive relationships are built. Students feel comfortable talking with teachers and the principal about their learning and other problems. There is a school-wide culture of high academic expectations combined with high personal expectations, and the general climate is one of respect.

As described by students, these three urban Catholic schools are havens from the neighborhood violence and gang activity. These schools remain relatively free of vandalism and graffiti. It is as if the schools themselves command the respect of the students and community. Students feel safe, both physically and emotionally, which sets the stage for learning to occur. “You don’t have a whole lot of people roaming the halls; here you have teachers who care about you; they want you to go somewhere and be somebody” (male, grade 7).

### **Caring and Concerned Teachers**

Teachers take the time to let students know that they are believed in and cared about as people, according to the students. Often cited as a positive trait by students was the view of a school where teachers care about teaching and student needs. “The teachers sit down and take time to listen to what’s on your mind, you know, and help you out with different problems you got. I don’t know. [this school] just changed me to a better person” (male, grade 7, new student).

Students believe that teachers are interested in helping them to succeed. There is a feeling among students who were interviewed that their teachers are highly dedicated and do not only take time, but also make time for them if they need help. “Freedom to learn...because they spend a lot of time with me...they come around and make sure that every single person knows what they’re working on. [The interviewer probed, “Every single person?”] Yes, they take that time” (male, grade 7).

In response to the question “What does your teacher do that helps you learn?” students emphasized that their teachers go above and beyond the required. Responses identified the teachers’ willingness to take time with difficult concepts, explaining ideas over and over again so that all students master the material. Other students commented that their teachers work hard to keep learning interesting. Students noted their appreciation of teachers who provide individual help, offer specific examples of how to do classwork, and give personalized feedback. Students valued the extra efforts of their teachers to make learning a pleasant process for them. “She makes learning fun.

She doesn't just throw a book at us and say, 'read.' Like in spelling, we have 'Jeopardy' (the game show). In math, we have quizzes, but fun quizzes. It's just interesting" (female, grade 6).

### **High Academic Expectations**

Students spoke of their enjoyment of "really learning." They described their schoolwork as difficult and seemed to be proud of this. There are high academic expectations for every student, and teachers make sure that all students do their work. Students learn basic skills, but in a way that makes them relevant to students and their future goals. The curriculum taught is challenging, yet the expectation is that everyone can learn it. "Well, since this school is much harder all together, I guess it will be able to help me in terms of being more organized, and it will help me with my study habits" (female, grade 7).

Students noted the way that teachers use repetition, make learning fun, provide examples of how to do things, give individual help, and demonstrate how students can improve their work. Homework was a consistent requirement, and students noted the value of homework in their learning process, even though they did not always enjoy doing the homework. Students appeared to recognize that doing homework helped them to learn more effectively. "She gives me extra homework...the extra practice helps me to learn better the next time" (female, grade 3).

### **Responsibility and Respect in the School Community**

Throughout the schools there is a sense of valuing each person. The expectation of respecting oneself and others permeates the school culture. Students are very aware of these expectations and referred to them in many of their comments about the school. School is viewed as a place where everyone's ideas are valued: teachers, parents, family, and students. Teachers provide individual attention, and when students need assistance, they are pulled aside rather than assisted in front of the entire class. Students view teacher actions as fair and consistent. "They give you fair chances; they let you know how you can bring your grades up...the teacher helps the child to make better grades; helps the child to have more self-esteem" (female, grade 5).

Also prevalent in the schools is the sense of responsibility that children have for their own learning and for their community. When students were asked about future career interests, many responses emphasized the need to give back to their communities. As students spoke with members of the research team, they communicated personal pride about their learning as well as appreciation for and ownership of their education. "She helped me to figure out that you have to do this in order to go on, to work a little harder" (female, grade 6).

Parents and other family members are valued participants in the educational process, which adds to students' sense of community in their schools.

Everyone is a potential resource for learning. The following student, for example, explained how her peers helped her. "For kids I would say Amita has helped me. April and Tamara explain to me how everything goes, inform me, come and help me if I do something wrong. Help me with homework. Teachers, they have these methods...[that] relate today to previous history. Explains everything" (female, grade 7).

The perception is that everyone is treated with dignity and when a student needs help there is someone available to provide that help. When asked about the teachers in his school, one young man replied, "Whenever you need them, they're there."

### **Visions of the Future**

The last recurring theme in these student responses focused on the ways that teachers reinforce the need for students to be well prepared for the future. There is concern for personal development, goal attainment, and academic achievement. Even second and third graders said that teachers tell them that they, the students, can be anything that they want to be if they work hard in school. This message is consistently reinforced at home, and is ingrained in the mindsets of the children. Most of the children plan to attend college after graduating high school, and the long-term statistics for the schools indicate that many students (over 46%) go on to college (Eichelberger et al., 1995). "In this school by seventh and eighth grade they prepare you to go to college; they talk about college. [Interviewer asked, "Do you plan to go to college?"] Yes...I was thinking about UCLA" (male, grade 7, new student).

Students were asked how doing well in school would help them in the future. Common responses from students suggest that they recognize the importance of working hard and having a strong academic background. Students also responded that their experiences at school help them to develop personal traits that will serve them throughout their life and provide them with the background needed to go on to college. Many students described specific situations where teachers consistently reinforced the expectations that students would go on to college. "I'm learning more about responsibility. I'm learning about growing up because being in fifth grade is grown up NOT. It's taught me good manners. If I don't like someone, I can't just have a grudge on him. I have to get along with him" (female, grade 5).

## **STUDENT VOICES AND WHAT THEY CAN CONTRIBUTE**

As we listened to the students, we were struck by their insights into their own learning. Much of what these students said in their interviews reinforced previous educational research: 1) the importance of social climate for learning (Coleman, 1987; Goleman, 1995), 2) the need for consistently high academ-



ic expectations and relevant curriculum (Haberman, 1995; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993), 3) use of effective teaching strategies (Wang et al., 1993), and 4) the role that student efficacy plays in the success of students in school and in life (Howard, 1992). This finding was consistent with the research findings of others (Nieto, 1994; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992; SooHoo, 1993) who have found that students and teachers often have common views about schooling. According to Phelan et al. (1992), "student views on teaching, learning, and the school as a workplace match remarkably well those of contemporary theorists concerned with learning theory, cognitive science, and the sociology of work" (p. 696).

Some of what takes place at these schools may be particular to private or parochial schools (Coleman, 1987; Convey, 1992) or to the opportunities that exist because of the small school size (about 250 students) (Grant, 1994). Parents pay tuition to send their children to these schools, and students are aware of their parents' sacrifice in sending them to a Catholic school and of the implicit and explicit expectations for their academic success. Regardless, student comments offer insights into what makes an effective school, at least through their eyes. In these particular schools, for example, we shared the results with teachers to give them a better sense of what matters most to students. Information from students can be used to reinforce areas of strength in a school, offering additional insights as the school works to become a better place in which to learn. When new teachers are employed, they too can be provided with staff development that is built on the framework provided by students.

## CONCLUSION

There are many ways to elicit student comments about learning and other school experiences: interviews, surveys, class discussions, informal conversations, and student journals. What is important is that as we consider the many voices within school communities we listen carefully to what students say they value. "Successfully educating all students in U.S. schools must begin by challenging school policies and practices that place roadblocks in the way of academic achievement for too many young people" (Nieto, 1994, p. 393). Listening to students about their learning and other school experiences can help. Students can offer the fresh perspectives that are needed to break the structural boundaries that keep educational systems from achieving transformation. These fresh insights may be instrumental to administrators when determining what changes or modifications are needed. Phelan et al. (1992) noted that most student suggestions for change are under the control of teachers and principals. This review of student comments suggests that students want to learn, and they value activities, behaviors, and an environment that helps them to learn.

Each school is unique and the voices of students are unique in each school setting. What works in one school setting may or may not be appropriate elsewhere. By investing the time to identify what is as well as what is not said by students, those responsible for reform efforts may be able to address educational issues that otherwise might not be considered. Listening to what works and addressing matters that are distressing for students reinforce the areas that are most beneficial for students while revealing what else might be needed. Asking students about their learning also encourages the use of higher-level thinking. Students who talk about their own learning do more thinking and reflection about learning. This is a student trait that most educators wish to develop but is often overlooked or under-emphasized.

Careful listening to student voices allows the problems of schooling to be faced with a new consciousness, using fresh insights from students to contribute to successful school change, which will in turn help to maintain the viability of Catholic schools.

Why listen to students? In the final analysis, the question itself suggests that it is only by first listening to students that we will be able to learn to talk with them. If we believe that an important basis of education is dialogue and reflection about experience, then this is clearly the first step. (Nieto, 1994, p. 422)

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## APPENDIX

### STUDENT ATTITUDE INTERVIEW

Student \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_

School \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: I want you to tell me a little bit about your school. Tell me enough so that I can get a good picture of what it's like to go to this school.

1. How long have you been at this school?
2. If someone asked you to describe (school name), what would you tell him or her about it?
3. What do you think is the best thing about (school name)?
4. What do you think makes (school name) different from other schools?
5. Who has helped you most at (school name)? Explain how that person has helped you.
6. How often do you have homework?
7. How long does it usually take you?
8. Do you get help with your homework? Who helps you?
9. What is one thing you would like the teachers at (school name) to know about you as a student?
10. What does your teacher do that helps you learn?
11. How will being successful in this school help you in your future?
12. If you were going to change something about this school, what would it be?

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