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The Case for Consulting Students

Decades of calls for reform have not succeeded in making schools places where all young people want to and are able to learn. It is time to invite students to join the conversations about how we might accomplish that. (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 9)

What happens when we *do* invite students to join conversations about school and school reform? What are their perspectives, and how might we use those perspectives to shape our practices as educators? This is a book about students' perceptions of academic engagement. In it, we present two central ideas. First, we consider what the fifty-eight middle schoolers in our study identified as central to their learning. Through their words and drawings, we come to see common themes across the group and consider the implications of these needs on classroom practice. Second, and perhaps more important, we urge you as educators to invite your own students into the conversation about schooling, to uncover your own students' perspectives on what engages them in learning. We do not propose that what our middle schoolers convey is what all students experience; rather, this book models an approach to action research that can help you learn from your students and shape life in your classroom based on that new knowledge.

LEARNERS: THE MISSING VOICE IN SCHOOL REFORM

School reform is a centuries-old endeavor. Veteran teachers can attest to the myriad initiatives that spiral through public education in the name of improvement and accountability. Yet, the vast majority of reform efforts rely on adult perspective, on what administrators, legislators, school boards, parents, teachers, and other adult stakeholders identify as central to improving student learning. Rarely are students consulted in attempts at school renewal. In fact, Erickson and Shultz's (1992) speculation on the role of student experience in school improvement more than a decade ago remains relatively true today:

> Virtually no research has been done that places student experience at the center of attention. We do not see student interests and their known and unknown fears. We do not see the mutual influence of students and teachers or see what the student or the teacher thinks or cares about during the course of that mutual influence. If the student is visible at all in a research study he is usually viewed from the perspective of adult educators' interests and ways of seeing. (p. 467)

Soo Hoo (1993) also highlighted the need for student voices in research that inform school change: "Traditionally, students have been overlooked as valuable resources in the restructuring of schools. Few reform efforts have actively sought student participation to inform restructuring efforts" (p. 392). In their discussion of schooling for young adolescents, Dickinson and Erb (1997) underscored this assertion: "Very few of the studies we found were written from teachers' perspectives. None were written from students' points of view. We need more studies written with the voices of teachers and students" (pp. 380–381). And Cook-Sather (2002) openly chided, "There is something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve" (p. 3).

We agree. Eliciting students' perspectives on current school initiatives, on instructional practice, and on matters of curriculum can be a powerful and effective means of meeting students' educational needs. Consulting directly the most important stakeholders—the students themselves—is critical to their academic engagement.

ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

As we build, and rebuild, the educational system, student achievement remains largely at the center. We know that for students to achieve, they

must be engaged (Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003). Many factors can increase student engagement, including type of instructional materials (Lee & Anderson, 1993); the subject matter and the authenticity of instructional work (Marks, 2000); and real-world observation, conceptual themes, and self-directed learning (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997).

But how do we know that students are engaged? Most often, students' academic engagement is measured by adults' observation of students' time on task. Observers determine when and to what extent students are engaged in the learning at hand. Can observers always adequately determine engagement? Surely when writing, planning, or acquiring a new idea, hobby, or skill, we do not always outwardly appear to be attending, even while we are truly "engaged." How often do we appear to be attentive, engrossed in a lecture, a sermon, or even a monologue on the other side of the telephone when in truth we are "miles" away? Young students learn very early to "pretend-attend." They learn to hide their confusion, their sense of failure, their secret off-task fiddling or drawing, their secret communications to friends, all the while giving every indication of attention. Given widespread pretend-attend, how often do we misread a student's level of engagement? And, if we misread engagement, how well can we respond to students' needs? Our method of discovery was to ask students. In the process we learned a lot, not the least of which was that when it is safe to do so, middle grade youngsters really like to talk about their experiences of school.

OUR STUDY AND METHODS

There is a fundamental premise to this book. If we really want to know what engages students, we need to ask them. Schubert and Ayers (1992) wrote, "The secret of teaching is to be found in the local details and the everyday life of teachers. . . . Those who hope to understand teaching must turn at some point to teachers themselves" (p. v). What if one replaced the words *teaching* and *teachers* with *learning* and *learners*? Just as it is important to turn to teachers to understand teaching, we must turn to students to understand learning. Asking students about times when they were actively learning and engaged moves beyond the constraints of observable time on task to uncover the complexities and messiness of true learning.

Learners have much to say about the quality of their schooling experiences. They provide rich insight into what "works" for them and, perhaps even more clearly, what does not. In an attempt to capture these perspectives, we consulted fifty-eight young adolescents in Grades 4 through 8 from six schools, which are described in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1   School and Community Attributes

School	School Type	School Size*	Average Class Size*	% Free/ Reduced Lunch*	Median Income ($)*	Per Pupil Cost ($)*
Town	K–6	300	20	32	40,000	6,000
Village	K–6	100	12	NA	45,000	10,000
Mountain Community	6–8	300	20	26	35,000	6,500
Main Street	K–8	1,000	20	9	70,000	7,500
Crosstown	K–8	275	15	17	46,000	9,500
Southaven	K–6	100	18	39	35,000	7,000

* Approximate numbers to ensure privacy

Stage 1

To understand students' perceptions of engagement, we began by individually interviewing twenty of the students from four of the schools. (Students, teachers, parents, and principals all provided written consent.) We invited students to draw and to talk about their educational experiences. To do this, we used four basic prompts, the exact wording of which varied based on the developmental level of the student:

1. Please describe a typical school day.

2. Please draw a time in school when you were really engaged, focused, and learning a lot, and then describe it.

3. Please draw a time in school when you were not engaged, not focused, and unsuccessful, and then describe it.

4. If you had a magic wand and could change anything about school, what would you change and why?

We asked students to draw in Prompts 2 and 3 because we were mindful of the challenges of reflecting retrospectively on learning tasks. Erickson and Schultz (1992) warned,

> Interviewing after the fact of immediate experience produces retrospective accounts that tend not only to be over rationalized but that, because of the synoptic form, condense the story of engagement in a way that fails to convey the on-line character of the actual engagement. (p. 468)

Drawing provides a powerful window into the minds of children. As a supplement to the interview, drawing placed the students back in the moment, and the feelings surrounding the events emerged. In talking about the pictures, the students elaborated and extended their experiences, and had the opportunity to convey their ideas without relying solely on verbal means. Although educational researchers rarely use drawing to capture what students think about their education (Haney, Russell, & Jackson, 1998; Olson, 1995), drawing can be a powerful lens into learners' perceptions (Haney, Russell, & Bebell, 2004).

We followed these twenty students through to their next school year, visiting them again for a shorter interview. During this second interview, we inquired about various themes that had emerged from the earlier data, including reading and the role of debate and disagreement in students' class-rooms. We also had a chance to "member-check," or to ask the students if our interpretations of the previous year's comments and drawings were valid.

Stage 2

Realizing that the power of this approach lay in connecting teachers with their own students' needs, we engaged another thirty-eight young adolescents from the remaining two schools in conversations with their own teachers. We invited two classes to draw and talk about their engage-ment, and we observed the subsequent learning that ensued as teachers learned about their students' perspectives, triumphs, and challenges. The combination of drawing and talk can be a helpful method for teachers' action research.

At first glance, the students in our study were alike in several ways. They reflected the relative ethnic and racial homogeneity of rural Vermont, for example. And the schools they attended were relatively small when compared to urban standards. Yet, these students were diverse in many important ways as well. We intentionally consulted students who repre-sented a wide range of academic achievement and behavior, socioeconomic status, and grade levels. We invited an even balance of gender. And the students attended schools that employed a wide array of practices, from traditional to more progressive. Their differences are perhaps made most evident, however, when we turn to the students' own words and drawings.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Stacey and Kevin (all names are pseudonyms) were both fourth graders. Both were White and attended small, rural schools. Yet, in many ways they

Figure 1.1   Stacey's Time of Engagement
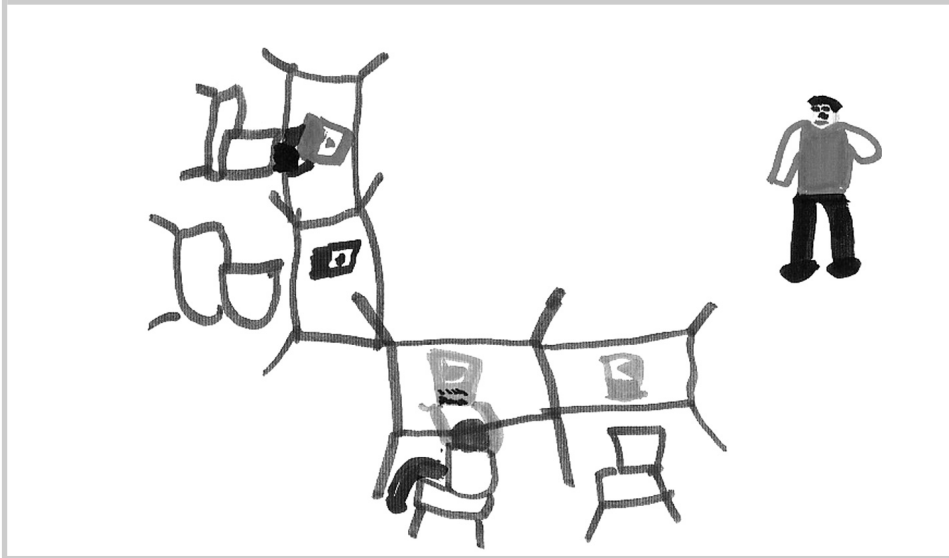
Figure 1.2   Kevin's Time of Engagement
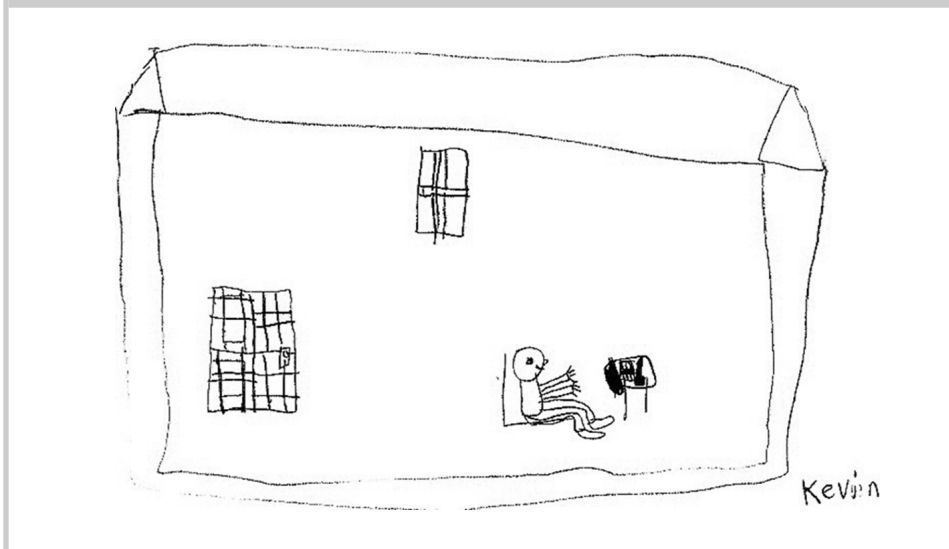
couldn't have been more different, as they described their schooling experiences.

Stacey eagerly explained, "I like school." When asked to depict a time when she "felt really focused" on what she was learning, Stacey drew her picture (Figure 1.1) and explained, "We're working on a slide show for a biography. And we have a book that we read. And I'm doing Michael

Jordan. And we go on this program called 'PowerPoint.' And it's when you make slides."

Stacey chose to show the colorful laptop computers as a focus in her drawing, with herself as the student seated on the right. She also portrayed the teacher, the larger figure approaching, coming to offer her help. When she and the others have questions, she explained, "We usually ask Mrs. F and she comes over and shows us what to do." Stacey displayed her feeling of connection with her arms reaching to the computer, the desks touching one another, and the availability of the teacher. When asked what she would tell a new student entering her class on the first day, Stacey stated, "That Mrs. F is really nice teacher and you're going to have a lot of fun in our classroom and that we do things different every day." School was such a good match for Stacey, in fact, that she was the one student in our study who could not easily identify a time of disengagement.

Interviewer: Now I'm going to ask you to do another picture. Only this time it's the opposite. It's a time in school when you're confused or bored or you just don't feel focused. Can you imagine such a time?

Stacey: No. . . .

I: Can you ever think of a time when your mind was just wandering?

S: Not really.

I: Really? You're always like this, just as focused as this? Never been bored in school?

S: Not really.

I: You've never thought, "Oh I wish this class would end."

S: I like school.

In stark contrast, Kevin's time of engagement was riddled with negativity. Depicting a time when he was writing in his journal (Figure 1.2), he explained that he felt good when he could "accomplish something. And I put journal here because I don't usually accomplish that. And like when I accomplish it and finally get done with it, it feels really good." Even within the act of describing a positive time, Kevin revealed that he did not really enjoy the task of journal writing: "I don't like it because it's boring and because I don't have enough time to think of it."

Although not represented here, Stacey used bright colors in her drawing, symbolic of her feeling of fit; in contrast, Kevin's lack of color symbolized his difficulties. Here there was no helpful teacher approaching him. His hands reaching across significant space for his journal toward the

heavily emphasized writing implements suggests how he viewed the task as a stretch. The gap between his needs and his school was well represented by the bars on the door and window in the drawing: school was a metaphorical prison.

How might Kevin's experience become more like Stacey's, in which he felt assistance was always available, in which he felt successful and eager to learn? How might teachers who understand Kevin's perspective close the gap between his needs and his experience? Truly listening to learners opens up a deeper level of understanding between teacher and student.

> How might your teaching change if you asked for students' input?

WHAT YOU CAN LEARN

How might your teaching and classroom change if you asked for students' input? As the examples of Kevin and Stacey illustrated, students can appear outwardly alike and yet have vastly different experiences. We do not propose to offer a recipe—a list of strategies or approaches that work for all students to increase their engagement. On the contrary, the differences among the young adolescents we consulted render such a list impossible. However, we were able to identify some common themes that this group of students found helpful in increasing engagement. We present those themes here to demonstrate how teachers can become reflective practitioners. We encourage you to generate and analyze your own students' drawings and words in order to modify your practice. We hope that by considering this approach to action research, you might invite your own students into the conversation about school and classroom reform.