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## "I Am Not Afraid to Listen": Prospective Teachers Learning from Students

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**“I Am Not Afraid to Listen”: Prospective Teachers Learning from Students to Work in City Schools. *Theory into Practice*, 48, 3,176-181. [Themed Issue: Urban Youth. 2009].**

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**Abstract**

This article describes a project that positions high school students as teacher educators within an undergraduate secondary certification program. A brief review of researchers’ arguments for listening to students and a detailed description of the project contextualize the perspectives of graduates of the program who currently teach in city schools. These teachers emphasize how the project allows them to: re-access the student experience in school; get clear on what it means to really listen; learn how important it is to take students’ experiences and perspectives seriously; recognize how much more engaged in their learning students are when teachers listen and respond to them; and understand the importance of knowing why, not only how, listening to students affects their learning. The article concludes with suggestions for how others can create similar opportunities to listen to students.

Students sometimes feel like their voices aren’t being heard, but being asked to give advice to prospective teachers who want to learn from us was a nice change from the norm. It was nice to be able to express our concerns about teachers in a constructive way that would (hopefully) prevent some of the problems we see in our teachers from developing in future teachers.

Students, like anyone else, just want to be heard and validated. When they experience this validation (especially from teachers), I find that they are more proactive about their learning. If someone can make them feel important, then they can feel good about themselves and their own learning...at least that’s what I’ve seen in my classroom!

Student voice is most successful when it enables students to feel that they are members of a learning community, that they matter, and that they have something valuable to offer.

All three of the statements above convey basically the same message. A first generation immigrant student who attended an urban high school, a Latina now in her fourth year as an English teacher at an urban school, and one of the pioneers of the student voice movement, Jean Rudduck (2007, p. 587), all argue that young people’ insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults (Cook-Sather, 2006c).

For the past 14 years, I have acted on these convictions through facilitating a project called Teaching and Learning Together (TLT) in the context of the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program.

This project positions high school students, like the one quoted above, as teacher educators; its goal is to inspire prospective teachers to ask about and attend to students' perspectives on what works, what does not work, and what could work for them in classrooms and school. In the following discussion I review researchers' arguments for listening to students, describe TLT, share the perspectives of graduates of the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program who currently teach in city schools, and offer some suggestions for how others can create partnerships like TLT.

### **Review of Researchers' Arguments**

There is a growing body of research that argues for and documents the importance of consulting students and listening closely to what they have to say (Arnot et al., 2004; Macbeath et al., 2003; Rodgers, 2006; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001; Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007). In England, national frameworks guide student consultation, and proponents and practitioners of student voice work have challenged traditional assumptions about and roles for young people in educational research and reform (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Macbeath et al., 2001; Fielding, 2004, 2001). In Australia, researchers have developed typologies for student participation in reform (Holdsworth, 2000) and blueprints for schools built on student-identified qualities that would be pedagogically engaging (Smyth, 2007). In Canada, efforts such as the Manitoba School Improvement Program have student voice as a key part of secondary school improvement strategies (Pekrul & Levin, 2007; see also Levin, 2000). In the United States, student voice efforts are more locally conceptualized and enacted, often as a result of university-based or foundation-supported research efforts (Mitra, 2007; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Wilson & Corbett, 2007; Yonezawa & Jones, 2007) or prompted and facilitated by non-profit organizations (e.g., What Kids Can Do, Our Education).

Including students' perspectives and voices in teacher education is a rare phenomenon. Although in England the potential of students to contribute to initial teacher education has been discussed sporadically for over thirty years (Meighan, 1977; Hull 1985; McKelvey & Kyriacou, 1985), in the United States, examples of efforts to include students as active participants in teacher preparation are few and far between (Bowman & Edenfield, 2000; Hadaway, 1993; Randolph, 1994; Sipe, 2000; Sullivan, 1998). Even fewer projects position students as teacher educators (Cook-Sather, 2002b; Cook-Sather & Youens, 2007; Donohue, Bower, & Rosenberg, 2003; Youens & Hall, 2006).

As other researchers have found (Corbett & Wilson, 2007; Rudduck, 2007), students from across contexts have remarkably similar perspectives on what works for them, what does not work for them,

and what could work for them in school. However, researchers have found considerable variation in how students experience being consulted, depending in large part on whether or not students feel that their perspectives and participation in school change are taken seriously (Lodge, 2005; Fielding, 2004; Silva, 2001). The key, according to Rudduck & McIntyre (2007), is that there is reciprocal trust, respect, and recognition among teachers and students participating in the consultation process. These are the premises of TLT.

### **Teaching and Learning Together**

Since 1995, I have facilitated TLT in the penultimate course required for certification to teach at the secondary level through the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program. The project aims to achieve the following political and pedagogical goals: (1) To complicate the traditional model according to which educational theorists and researchers generate pedagogical knowledge and pass it down to teachers with students at the end of this transfer; (2) To alter the power dynamics that usually inform the teacher/student relationship, with the teacher conceptualized as the sole authority and the student conceptualized as passive recipient of the teacher's knowledge; (3) To prepare teachers committed to eliciting and acting upon students' perspectives not only during their preparation but also throughout their careers; and (4) To foster in high school students a critical awareness of their educational experiences and opportunities and the confidence and vocabulary to assert what they need and want as learners.

Through its four-part design, TLT strives to enact these commitments in the semester prior to practice teaching. The first component of the project is a weekly email exchange between pairs of pre-service teachers and 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students who attend public high schools in the area; the email exchange is based loosely on topics explored in weekly seminars at the college (i.e., what makes a good teacher, lesson plan, test, etc.) but also addresses topics the individual pairs feel are relevant to teaching and learning. The second component is weekly conversations among all the high school students facilitated by an experienced teacher at the students' school; these discussions are also based on the topics explored in the college seminar and expanded based on the students' own issues and interests, and they are audiotaped, transcribed, and assigned as required reading to the pre-service teachers. The third component is a weekly discussion in the college course of how the exchange is going—what pre-service teachers are struggling with, learning, and integrating into their plans for practice. And the final component is an analysis paper written by each of the pre-service teachers at the end of the semester that

draws on the email exchange, transcripts, and class discussions. (See Cook-Sather, 2006a, 2006b, 2002a, 2002b, and Cook-Sather & Youens, 2007, for other discussions of this project.)

### **Urban School Teachers Looking Back on Their Participation in TLT**

In a follow-up questionnaire I sent to graduates of the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program who have gone on to teach in city schools, I asked what, if any effects, their participation in TLT had on their teaching in urban settings. What emerged in their responses has particularly important implications for teaching in urban schools but applies as well to other educational contexts. These teachers asserted the importance of: re-accessing the student experience in school; getting clear on what it means to really listen; learning how important it is to take students' experiences and perspectives seriously; and recognizing how much more engaged in their learning students are when teachers listen and respond to them. Their responses also revealed the importance of knowing why, not only how, listening to students affects their learning.

Regarding the importance of re-accessing the student experience in school, a teacher with four years of experience reflected:

This project made me realize and remember that I was once a student and I should never detach myself from the experience of being a student and a learner. I remember [during my participation in TLT] listening to things that were affecting [my high school partner] personally, emotionally, and mentally. If I had not seen this particular view of a student, I probably would have been a teacher numb to students' perspectives inside and outside my classroom because I never thought about students in other roles besides learners.

Another teacher, also with four years of experience, offered another angle on this important human connection:

I have always been good at listening to others, but [participating in TLT] helped me to tune in to the teenage crowd. At first I was afraid of being too close in age with my dialogue partner, but then I realized the advantage of my situation. I found it easier to relate to my partner because I recalled what it was like to be a teenager. The project helped me to be less afraid of the audience I was interested in teaching because it helped me to realize that I could relate to them.

A second point the teachers emphasize is the importance of getting clear on what it means to really listen. Listening to students means not only paying attention to their words but also to what they say with their bodies. A teacher with five years of experience wrote: "I also realize that listening

involved watching. Therefore, I pay attention to the students' body language." Really listening also includes acting on what you hear. A teacher with one year of experience explains:

It is REALLY important to listen to and act on what they actually say. Just asking isn't enough, if they see you SAY you care about what they think, but then you don't do anything about what they say and there is no change, that seems to frustrate them (rightfully so). At the end of the year, the students said they felt like I listened to them and that I would make changes to the curriculum in ways that their other teachers wouldn't. I think that action was important in making the students feel this way.

Along the same lines, a teacher with four years of experience wrote: "Every year I hear the same comment: 'Ms. V., you're the only teacher who listens to us. The other teachers just want to talk about the subject they're supposed to be teaching—which is fine, but you do both.'"

The importance of really listening to students is inseparable from taking their perspectives seriously. A teacher with one year of experience explained:

It is just really important to make sure there is a purpose to the student perspective you are getting, and that you can do something with the information they give you that tells them that you are learning from what they are telling you. If you are asking clear questions and communicating what you will do with the information and you are giving them space to share their ideas, they will take it seriously and you will both learn much more. If they feel like they are being taken seriously by you, they will in turn take the responsibility of sharing their ideas seriously as well.

Remembering students' experiences, really listening to them, and taking their perspectives seriously allows teachers to create classrooms in which students are active partners not only in dialogue but also in learning. A teacher with four years of experience explains: "I feel I was naturally inclined [to listen to students] already, but [TLT] might have helped me feel comfortable being less authoritative (dictator) and more co-creative in relating to students." A teacher with eleven years of experience, the first three of those in an urban school, wrote:

After participating in this project, I began my teaching career with a student-centered rather than a teacher focused perspective. And this perspective has shaped how I interacted with students individually as well as how I have shaped curriculum. The emphasis on dialogic exchange made me very comfortable creating a question-based classroom and an inquiry stance within a school district curriculum that valued a 'skills' based approach. I was literally able to teach against the grain because I felt like I had a way of connecting with students in ways that simply telling them the 'whats' of the curriculum would not allow.

Part of having such a foundation is knowing why, not only how, listening to students affects their learning:

I would have probably wanted to ask the students' opinion as a teacher prior to participating in [TLT], but having that be an integral part of our class taught me that there is a method to it, pedagogical reasons for it, and how seldom it happens for students. This helped me organize the way in which I would include student perspectives in the classroom.

### **What Teachers Can Do To Support Listening to Students**

Every one of the graduates whom I contacted emphasized—as students themselves do—the importance of building relationships in which listening and responding are central. Indeed, it is the building of relationships that allows a school to create a “listening culture” (Bragg, 2007). The following are some steps teachers and schools might take toward creating such a culture (these suggestions are adapted from earlier discussions of TLT; see Cook-Sather, forthcoming, 2007b, 2002).

#### *Take Small and Large Steps With Your Classrooms to Support Student Voice and Participation*

Invite students in a wide variety of ways into dialogue about what works for them, what does not, and what could. A first step might be to share with students in your classroom the perspectives of students published in some of the texts referenced in this and other articles in this special issue, talk with your students about how their perspectives confirm or contrast those perspectives, and discuss together changes you and they might make to address their learning goals for themselves and your learning goals for them. Consider how these may be built into specific assignments and activities as well as broader classroom discourse.

#### *Create School-Wide Structures and Mechanisms to Support Student Voice and Participation*

Teachers and school leaders can create school-wide structures and mechanisms that support student voice and participation. These can be as simple, but as potentially efficacious, as regular meetings to which all members of the school community are invited, or they can entail a more complex re-imagining of the roles of those within the educational community (see Cook-Sather, 2008a, 2008b).

#### *Establish Partnerships Between K-12 and College Faculty*

Partnerships can be established either with neighborhood colleges or universities or with more distant ones through the use of technological media such as e-mail (see Cook-Sather, 2007a, for a discussion of the role of e-mail in TLT). A program like TLT invites student input focused in a

concentrated way on classroom practices (i.e., creating and maintaining a positive classroom environment, lesson planning, test development, etc.). A program could also link with courses earlier in pre-service teachers' preparation, perhaps focused on multicultural education, special education, urban education, or literacy in which school-based teachers and groups of students could establish dialogues with pre-service teachers that address these important issues earlier in pre-service teachers' preparation.

### *Integrate Such Partnerships into the Culture of the School*

Although much can be gained from isolated partnerships, in which individual teachers and programs of teacher preparation work together, much more can be gained from integrating such partnerships into the culture of the school. Ways to accomplish such integration might include:

- Issue school-wide invitations to participate and create an application process through which teachers and students will be selected to participate.
- Make time and provide support for orientation to the collaboration. Sponsor a day-long or half-day orientation on site at which participants discuss the rationale and premises of the collaboration, invite past participants to share their insights and advice, and generally create continuity across years of participation.
- Integrate opportunities for participation into the regular school schedule (as opposed to having them squeezed after school between classes and sports or clubs) and, by extension, into the curriculum.
- Plan professional development days around student input and lessons from the collaboration and around what teachers learn through their participation in such projects. Have teachers and students co-present at these events, thus highlighting student voice as well as what teachers can learn from students.
- Invite student and teacher participants to share their insights at faculty, school board, and PTA meetings or in other forums of school- and district-wide discussion. Either in teams, as suggested above, or in groups within the same constituency, teachers and students could provide firsthand accounts like those included here, which effectively convey to others the power of this kind of experience.
- Support and train teacher leaders at the school site who are committed to student voice and engagement.

### *Advocate for Recognition of Teachers Committed to Student Voice*

Consider ways to ensure that teachers who attend to student perspectives on their learning are acknowledged and rewarded for those efforts. One approach might be to include a question on a standard teaching or administrative evaluation form that asks: Did the instructor make changes during the class that were responsive to learning needs expressed by students? Addressing this question, and providing evidence of change based on its answers, could become not only legitimate but required part of the review and promotion process (Cook-Sather, 2002a).

### **Conclusion**

The feedback I have received from students who have participated in TLT (see Cook-Sather, forthcoming) is consistent with the findings Rudduck & McIntyre (2007) report based on a comprehensive look at the efforts to consult students they facilitated in England: that consulting students enhances student commitment and capacity for learning through strengthening self-esteem, enhancing attitudes toward school and learning, developing a stronger sense of membership, developing new skills for learning, and transforming teacher-student relationships from passive and oppositional to more active and collaborative (p. 152). Positioning students as among those with the experience and critical perspective to prepare future urban school teachers to be effective in their classrooms is a particularly promising practice because it can dispel the fear of heeding students' voices and help teachers develop a mindset that will keep them listening to students throughout their careers.

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