Capacity Building Series

Student Voices

Teacher: What happens in your mind when you read a chapter book?

Student: I dream of something — like I'm flying or I can be a superhero. In my mind I can be anything I want from those books.

Conversation with Grade 2 student

"When I came here it was pretty strange because I didn't know no one, I was just shy and sitting by myself all day, just worrying, looking at everyone talking to people that I didn't know. Then I had a teacher who really liked me a lot and he told me that I was pretty good at math."

Conversation with Junior Student

May 2011

Student Identity and Engagement in Elementary Schools

Developing awareness, understanding and respect for what matters to students has become critical in education today because "learning can no longer be understood as a one-way exchange where we teach, they learn." Rather, "it is a reciprocal process that requires teachers to help students learn with understanding" (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009). In the shift from a transmission to a discourse model of education, researchers verify what classroom teachers know intuitively – that ensuring students are listened to and valued and respected for who they are leads to greater student engagement which, in turn, leads to greater student achievement (Cummins, et al., 2005; Flessa et al., 2010; Leithwood, McAdie, Bascia, & Rodrigue, 2006; Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009).

In their recent work on education reform, Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley (2009) also build on this insight, urging education leaders and policy makers to ensure that students are recognized as "partners in change rather than merely targets of change efforts and services – more involved in their own learning and learning choices, actively consulted about the quality and improvement of teaching, and substantially engaged in the overall governance of the school and its development" (2008, p. 59).

Involving students as "partners in change" invites us to:
- see the student as a whole person
- know every student in more dimensions than just the academic
- support students in playing a more active role in their learning
- include student voice in planning learning opportunities

reach every student

Ontario

Making student identity visible – and respected!

"Identity texts refer to artifacts that students produce. Students take ownership of these artifacts as a result of having invested their identities in them. These texts (written, spoken, visual, musical, or combinations in multimodal form) hold a mirror up to the student in which his or her identity is reflected back in a positive light."

(Cummins, 2006)

To learn more: *ELL Students Speak for Themselves: Identity Texts and Literacy Engagement in Multilingual Classrooms* http://www.curriculum.org/secretariat/files/ELLidentityTexts.pdf

While the exclusion of identity and voice from classroom learning and school experiences can lead to student disengagement and behavioural issues (such as defiance, silence and poor attendance), paying attention to them can be transformative for students and teachers. A widening awareness of students' capacities can lead to new excitement about teaching and enrich pedagogic practices (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007).

Getting to Know Our Students

When teachers explore student identity in the spirit of discovery and out of authentic caring for each student as a whole person, meaningful relationships develop.

Every student lives within other communities: the family, a cultural community, a social community and perhaps in an international community as well. These are the support structures that lend strength to the education of each student. Sometimes, these communities can be outside our personal comfort zones – languages we don't understand, social networks we may not be familiar with or norms we may not understand or find difficult. It is particularly at these times that stepping out of our comfort zone can help. How we interact with others, our students, matters.

The dimensions of identity are complex and far-ranging. They might include: ethnicity, gender, friendship circles, race, talents, language(s), social media involvement, expectations of self, aspirations, beliefs, spiritual beliefs, socio-economic situation, degree of self-awareness, passions and interests, sense of self-efficacy – in fact, all the factors that form the unique person in the classroom. There is a rich repertoire of possibilities for inclusion, for drawing each individual into the classroom. Through feedback and conversation about different aspects of students' lives, teachers facilitate personal investment in learning.

Teachers know each of their student's strengths, needs and interests. This enables them to help make relevant and authentic student connections to learning. Knowing a student's career aspirations, what he or she is curious about in a subject area, or what he or she gets excited about after school can be built into lessons that build a bridge of relevance between what matters to a student and curriculum concepts and content.

Dialogue with students to inform planning may raise questions like, Do my students have access to a computer beyond the school? How far do they live from the local library? Do students have responsibilities at home? Even a few minutes of

INSPIRING STUDENTS' INVESTMENT IN LEARNING

When we know each student well, we are in a position to affirm the very best we see in them …

Holding high standards is not about making the work "more difficult," but about motivating through relevance and personalization. Jim Cummins (2006) uses the term "inspired instruction" to refer to the type of teaching that we all want for our own children and for ourselves as life-long learners. Inspired education is about the sorts of classroom experiences and lessons that we remember throughout our lives and that motivate us to want to learn more.

Inspired instruction …

- is social and interactive – student self-reflection, peer to groups, student to teacher, student to family, student to broader community, including the global community through technology
- asks higher-order thinking questions while providing the support needed to explore the questions in an in-depth way – individually and collaboratively

day-to-day conversation – about local events or last night's hockey's game – yield rich knowledge about a student as well as help build a trusting relationship. Teachers can find out what students are thinking about as they work through the topics and tasks that are assigned so that instruction can be made personalized and precise. Through attentive conversation, they can begin to hear "the voice inside the student's brain" that either advances or is a barrier to their progress.

Understanding the contexts and interests students have helps to personalize learning, and so, to engage the student. Disengagement was once thought to be a function of low literacy performance and conversely that high literacy scores would indicate higher levels of engagement. We now know that this is not the case (Rogers, 2000). Rather, "learning, development and identity formation ... are interactive and shape each other as they evolve" (ACPA & NASPA, 2004).

Listening to What Our Students Want

Students know what they want. The adage 'When you go fishing, what do you put on the hook? What you like or what the fish likes?' suggests a starting point for classroom practices.

According to a recent study on disengagement from school in the adolescent years (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009), students want to:
- solve real problems
- engage with knowledge that matters
- make a difference in the world
- be respected
- see how subjects are interconnected
- learn from and with each other and people in their community

In this study and in others (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2005), students indicate, without exception, that they value education, that they want a high-quality education and that they want their education to be personally relevant to them. Students can be engaged in their school's self-assessment process, starting with Kindergarten children who can be asked to take photos of the things they like about their school or classroom. For more examples of student voice as a leverage to better learning, refer to the *School Effectiveness Framework* http://www.curriculum.org/secretariat/framework/index.shtml.

Parent engagement is important, too.

We know that when parents are actively invited and supported to become partners in their son's/daughter's education, students are more likely to experience school as a part of community, and become more engaged in their learning – "When we work together, we build strong communities that support our shared goals for our children and youth"

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008)

- proactively affirms the identity of every individual in the classroom – relationship building, voice, choice, leadership opportunities, choice of resources, personalization, differentiation, high expectations
- encourages student questioning and risk taking in a safe environment – respectful, solution-seeking classroom culture
- leads to the co-creation of knowledge and artifacts that are based on the social realities of students

How can we make it safe for students to express themselves? How can we honour what we learn? On a larger scale, inspired instruction means ...
- being alert to students who may seem uncomfortable voicing their thoughts and finding ways to make it safe for them to do so
- being alert to any student who may not be participating (for a multitude of possible reasons), finding the barrier, then working together to remove it
- ensuring that activities and tasks are structured to suppport all students in participating actively – by assigning roles, raising levels of personal accountability through the need for interdependence to complete the required expectations
- being alert to our own discomfort

Setting the Stage for Student Engagement

Opting out of learning is not an option when learning is personal and relevant …

- Teachers engage students in dialogue as they work to extend learning, stimulate discussion, pose questions, provoke thinking, suggest resources and help determine next learning steps.
- Students engage in productive collaboration with other students, their teachers and others outside the classroom and school around problems, issues, questions or ideas that are of real concern to them and central to their learning.

Classroom norms are collaborative and inclusive when each student's voice matters …

- Students help each other observe these norms.
- Diversity is valued; a multitude of languages and cultures are welcomed into the classroom.
- Social and emotional skills needed to navigate relationships are modelled, taught and practised.

Students have creative ownership of their learning environment when it is a shared space …

- Student work that is on display is representative of the work of all students over the course of a unit; no voices are marginalized.
- Images / displays connect curriculum to the imagination and to the broader world.

Students take responsibility for their learning when they are intrinsically motivated to learn …

- Students know how to assess their work using success criteria.
- Marks are not the primary motivators, learning is; students have interest and see value in what they are doing.

Learning is enjoyable when worthy of the time and effort of each and every individual in the class …

- Learning design engages prior understandings and background knowledge.
- Conceptual learning is emphasized in order to deepen understanding of ideas and to create connections across disciplines.
- Authentic assessment supports student capacity to self-assess and provides quality feedback to peers in the spirit of helping each other learn.
- Students contribute to the co-creation of success criteria that challenge them to experience deep investment in their learning.
- Choice of resources reflect the most current knowledge available.

"Setting the Stage for Student Engagement" draws from research of Brandsford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; Cummins, 2006; Friessen, 2009; Leithwood, McAdie, Bascia & Rodrigue, 2006.

In Sum

Identity + voice = engagement + learning!

While the rewards are many, engaging students in learning is not a linear process, nor is it achieved once and for all. When challenges emerge, it may be helpful to keep in mind that "student engagement must be constantly negotiated among students, their families and advocates, teachers, community members, and the decision-makers in education" (Rivière, Sotomayor, West-Burns, Kugler, McCready, 2008).

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