



Listening to the Voices of Young Adolescents

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Middle school students learn a whole lot better when they are not being lectured to, being directed, forced, or ordered, but when choice is given and learning is interactive. Traditional classrooms in our society today define teacher and the classroom in general as a straight-answer, fact-feeding, dictatorship that cares little for the opinions and interests of the pupils, and that teaches little about the reasons behind the facts. Schools are meant to prepare kids for life and make them more apt to be successful in their life. One would suppose that the government having authority over public schooling would want the generations of the future to be more successful in life, thus feeding the needs of the economy and the requirements of democracy, the spread of freedom, the reduction of discrimination in all forms, and exercising the rights and morality of citizens. One would assume that the government—wanting such a society—would encourage the development of these attributes through schooling. However as we look at the teaching of present schools, we see suspension of constitutional rights, undemocratic classrooms, and the implementation of the fact-feeding teaching methods and passive roles for students. Now maybe it's just me, but I would have to think that we should be promoting the opposite of these things: am I wrong?

—eighth grader

Several years ago, we began collecting free-write responses from young adolescents, who responded to the question: “What should middle school teachers know about middle school students?” To date, we have collected and analyzed approximately 2,700 unedited responses from young adolescents who attend middle schools in diverse communities across North America. We have found their responses to be perceptive, honest, and wise. The above words of one eighth grade student may surprise you as much as they did us, initially. Some have dismissed them as an anomaly of brilliance and maturity. While this particular quote demonstrates verbal fluency and sophisticated understandings, we discovered that the majority of letters we received contained similarly profound insights, reflecting the remarkable capacity of young adolescents to describe themselves and their school worlds. Embedded in their messages are critical insights about the nature of schooling these young people experience, the kind of schooling they wish they had, and glimpses of their struggles, hopes, fears, and even dreams. After completing this study, we felt compelled to share our findings and wonder how

middle level schooling might be improved if we regularly went directly to our young people and took seriously what they have to say.

Why ask the kids?

There are many philosophical and pedagogical reasons why embracing student voice matters in our school and classroom improvement efforts. Constructivists have long argued that unless we know what matters to our learners, we have little chance of engaging them. Indeed, it makes sense to ask students to tell us about themselves and their school experiences if we are to understand who it is we teach to create learning experiences that better work for the young people we serve.

We believe, too, that it is vital to ask young people to have a voice, because, regardless of age, they are citizens in our democracy and ought to have a say in what happens in their schools. Beane, (2005) who has written extensively on democratic schooling and curriculum integration, said it this way:

In a democracy, the principle of human dignity insists that people have a say in decisions that affect them and that

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their say counts for something. For this reason, probably no idea is more widely associated with democratic classrooms than the involvement of young people in making decisions about what and how things are done. (Beane, 2005, p. 19)

Finally, knowing what students regard to be important rests at the heart of their learning. Learning takes place only if and when a learner chooses to participate in that process (Caine & Caine, 1997). Moreover, learning demands more than participation. It assumes that students have made an emotional and psychological investment in the learning experience. We cannot expect to facilitate high levels of such investment when we fail to partner with young people in shaping what and how they learn.

The nature of this study

The small-scale study reported here is intended to add narrative depth and clarity to our understanding of what young adolescents think, feel, and experience as young people and as middle school students. While meeting the developmental needs of middle school children has always been fundamental to the middle school concept (Nesin & Brazee, 2005), there are very few studies to date that actually include student voice in defining what “developmental” means for those who live it.

We asked teachers in approximately 30 different middle level schools to solicit written responses to our key question and to send them to us unedited. We asked that these be done in school, so as to insure the responses were raw. We received responses from students in sixth through eighth grade in rural, urban, and suburban middle schools across the United States and from Ontario and Alberta, Canada. The question was intentionally framed to help students to consider the broader nature of middle school and middle school

It seems that we have yet to dismantle the *hormones with feet* image.

students and to avoid gathering personal student stories. Some of the letters had to be discarded, as they appeared to have been generated as a three-paragraph essay assignment and were thus refined in ways that may have altered the student’s original intent.

We then read all letters and created a coding system

associated with emerging themes and noted patterns. All letters were cycled through at least two rounds of coding, in which we highlighted passages that reflected the emerging themes. Most letters contained thoughts and concerns on several themes. By the close of the analysis, we had identified several subthemes, all of which we clustered under two broad areas: quality



*Photo caption to be provided
photo by Alan Geho.*

learning and quality relationships. Here, we will attempt to share with you what students have told us and what we think these findings mean for those seeking to improve middle grades education.

What young adolescents want us to know about them

Young adolescents crammed lifetimes into single paragraphs, dealing with everything from pimples to power and from peers to politics. In studying all of the letters, with several rounds of coding and analysis, we concluded that the majority of their most pressing concerns and needs could be captured under the themes quality relationships and quality learning.

Quality relationships

Above all, it was abundantly clear that young adolescents long for healthy and rewarding relationships with their teachers and with their peers. Most hope that they will find school relationships to be characterized by compassion, respect, personalization, fellowship, and

friendship. For most, such relationships are the exception rather than the norm.

A dominant theme in the letters was the desire to have positive relationships with teachers who were seen as helpful, kind, happy, encouraging, patient, respectful, and non-judgmental. Students observed that they needed teachers who truly knew them as people and as students, genuinely enjoyed them, and were committed to working with them to make success happen. Many reported that being less well known contributed to the problems they faced in school. Students do not feel that they are steadily treated as whole people with whole lives. Moreover, students repeatedly urged teachers to know them as unique people and as unique students. In spite of the



Photo caption to be provided
photo by Alan Geho.

egocentric label assigned to most young teens, they were as concerned for others as for themselves. They lobbied for less anonymity and more personalization:

I feel teachers don't really get to know the real you. They spend all their time telling you what to expect that they don't even take the time to know your personality. ... Most teachers seem as though they don't care a thing about if you do well in school. They teach you the information you need to know then if you have questions they say look over your notes and you'll find the answer. Obviously I looked over my notes already and I still don't know so in that way they are of no help. Some teacher's care but others just don't. I love teachers that care about everyone equally. Those are rare so when you get them treasure the moment. Only kidding, not all teachers are bad; there are some really great teachers.

This finding has emerged elsewhere, including in the California Institute for Education in Transformation study (Poplin & Weeres, 1992), in which student interviews revealed that they believed teachers cared about them if they laughed with them, trusted them, were honest, affectionate, and recognized them as individuals (Poole, 1984; Powell, 1993). One student response captures this finding:

The key to being a good teacher is to know the kids. You have to know every single one and have a relationship with every single one. I think that one thing that really allows me to work hard is knowing that my teacher knows where I am in life at that moment. If they don't know me, I will tend not to work as hard for them.

In some schools, students repeatedly asked that teachers not yell at them, which leads us to speculate about the norms that guide teacher-student relationships in those schools. In other schools, the requests centered on teachers having more respectful images of adolescents that do not label them as immature, crazy, or "hormones with feet."

What middle school teachers don't get about their students is that we don't like being treated like two year olds. We like to be treated like we are in the middle because that's where we are—we are between children and teenagers. It embarrasses us when we are handled like kids.

Respectful treatment, however, was ultimately linked to descriptions of teachers who honored students as human beings with human vulnerabilities and struggles and with lives outside of school.

It might be nice for them to know that we are living human beings, we have feelings and we are people. Sometimes teachers think of you just as a student not a person, so they push you over your limits and sometimes they maybe might talk to you a little louder than they usually do if it is taking you a long time to answer a problem or you don't understand. We are people too! We are not perfect. We can't do everything perfectly the first time. If teachers understand this, it might make us feel more comfortable and we might do better in school.

Peer relationships, like relationships with teachers, were identified as a desirable, yet often threatening, force in shaping the kind of psychological climate students

experience. Young adolescents want teachers to be far savvier about the social dynamics they encounter. As one student explained:

I think every middle school teacher should know, or try to understand, the social whirlwind of statuses that form and so quickly harden with every student in their place. What may seem, to a teacher, a classroom full of students peacefully working, may be exactly the opposite to a student. It becomes a room full of pitfalls, danger signs, and safe havens situated carefully in familiar territory. Every student, throughout the day, moves cautiously on “safe” paths from room to room. They will not read in another level (or) territory. They will not mix; everyone knows their place. Only a teacher or a student from a higher level will cause them to mix.

The separation between boys and girls is even more pronounced. Boys have territory separate from girls, and their own divisions in that. Boys and girls will absolutely not mix, except in the rare groups of girls and boys that are friends; these groups are either absolute highest status, or the very bottom. Every student, boy or girl has their place, their territory, their paths, the people they can stay with on their level. I think middle school teachers should know of and try to understand this code of the students. This network of statuses and levels is ever present in middle schools. While some students may not be directly aware of it, they always have a subconscious understanding of where they fit. This is very important for middle school teachers to know.

As a consequence of such unfriendly, unequal, or even hostile peer relationships, many students felt stressed and anxious in school. There were several hundred letters that specifically called for teachers to attend to the uncomfortable tensions that competitive peer relationships produced, including the bullying and harassment that young adolescents experience in school. Young adolescents do not just want friendly peer relationships, they want respectful, collaborative, and equitable relationships. They want to feel psychologically safe, they want others to also feel safe, and they are seeking adult assistance in securing such safety. In the current educational milieu, with heightened attention to student achievement as measured by standardized tests, many middle level schools are choosing to devote less rather than more time to the affective dimension of school life. Packaged anti-bullying

programs are not what these middle schoolers are asking for. Instead, they are asking for the quality of human exchange in schools and classrooms to be more democratic, humane, and respectful.

Middle school teachers should know that the kids in middle school are very stressed. From classes to social status to expectations the school can be a very strenuous place. A lot of kids worry about popularity. The way other kids act towards others can be very harsh on someone’s self-esteem. That will affect the quality of the work the kids do. ... Also the expectations people have may also be stressful. The kids have to live up to the expectations of parents, teachers, and even peers.

Quality learning

Students expressed considerable awareness of teachers’ beliefs about students and their perceived capacity to learn. According to the students represented here, teachers too often underestimate or overestimate the capacities of young adolescents, and, at times, use the perils of puberty to dismiss student disengagement. As one student explained: “Not all of us are stuck on the other sex. ... We are still interested in learning.”

This is an enormously important message. Teacher expectations of students play a powerful role in student learning and achievement (Lipman, 1998). In middle schools, it seems clear from this data, that we have yet to dismantle the “hormones with feet” image of the young adolescent learner. As middle school educators endeavor to advance student learning and achievement and offer equally engaging learning to all young people, they will need to redefine the capacity of this age group, recognizing that puberty does not necessarily place young adolescent learners at intellectual peril (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

While students did not see themselves as intellectually compromised as a result of development, they did acknowledge their development as an important factor, influencing how they best learn. Many implored teachers to apply developmental understandings in their lesson planning and design. One student pleaded with teachers to not lecture at length:

Teachers, teachers, teachers, when will they learn. I have the attention span of a raisin. I need to be kept busy with things that are fun. Teachers need to find out what interests kids and what stuff they like to do. So for a less whiny, annoyed, and temperamental class, make it fun.

The majority of the student letters declared classroom

learning in need of some additional related improvements. They wanted classroom experiences to reveal reasons why what they were learning mattered in the world. Moreover, they wanted to be actively engaged, doing what real learners do—researching, writing, analyzing, presenting, collaborating, thinking, and so on. While some wished for fun, they often added that they were not trying to escape learning but believed it could be both substantive and fun at the same time.

Eighth graders need a special form of teaching. We could never learn about a subject by reading a textbook. We need it explained and compared to life. It would help if the learning was fun.

They also know what does not constitute quality learning:

The teachers should know that everyone hates to do worksheets from the book. Mrs. S. has done lots of hands-on projects, which I love. Of course students will get bored if everyday we come into class and the teacher says, “Get your social studies books out and these other five worksheets.” Well of course the students will be getting zeroes because they are bored of doing the same thing everyday.

As we studied more intently the responses related to quality learning, we concluded that most young adolescents are eager for us to respect their diverse ways of knowing and doing and incorporate this principle into lessons. They call for differentiation but with supreme attention to difference as an asset rather than a deficit:

I think that all the middle school teachers should know how each individual student learns. They should know how they learn and change the way they teach around all different methods. Sometimes they need to see it drawn out, sometimes they need scrap paper to write out the numbers and sometimes they can do it in their head in 10 seconds. We all learn different and we need different teaching.

Another student pointed out the need to have teachers acknowledge that all students are capable of success:

I think that every teacher should know that every seventh grade student is smart in one subject or another. You may not be great at spelling or science but I bet you're pretty smart in another area. I've learned that no one is dull or unintelligent. We all flourish in one way or another.

Students want teachers to value every child's capacity to learn. One student makes it clear that it is not enough to consider different learning styles. She is asking that teachers embrace and respect the many and varied aspirations students have:

I think one of the most important things they should understand is that every single student has their own hopes and dreams. For some it may be to be on the honor roll all through high school, go to Harvard, and grow up to be a very “successful” person. For others, it may just be not to flunk out of high school. You need to embrace everyone's wants. That doesn't mean that you should give more attention to those with higher hopes. Just work with each one and encourage them to do their best.

Just as other researchers have discovered (Corbett & Wilson, 1997; Richards & Combs, 1992), students are motivated by teachers who care enough to teach concepts and content using diverse ways of knowing. What our data adds is that students also want an inclusive classroom, where meeting diverse needs does not leave any student feeling less than any other student. This intense concern for the welfare of their peers was found throughout the student letters and implies that students observe inequities in how their peers are treated frequently enough to warrant their concern.

While many letters dealt with decency and equity in relationships and with the understanding of learning differences, there was much left unsaid. In our total database, very few letters addressed curriculum. This did not surprise us, as in the history of the middle school movement even the professional community has avoided the curriculum discussion (Dickinson, 2001). The closest students ventured to critiquing curriculum was in their all-out attack on homework, targeting volume of work as one major area of concern. Few had considered curriculum relevance or meaning as a malleable attribute of schooling. Many seem to take for granted that curriculum was destined to be largely irrelevant. Others emphasized getting good grades or completing assignments as learning, never considering the worth of what they were compelled to do. Hence, they focused on making school less uncomfortable rather than making learning meaningful.

Out-of-the-ordinary responses

We did uncover some exceptions. A cluster of letters was so stunningly different that we were compelled to trace

them back to their home schools. We found that these students were in unique middle school settings, where their teachers deliberately worked to create democratic environments—where students shared power in developing and planning the curriculum and learning experiences.

A second analysis of this cluster of letters led us to investigate more fully just how these responses were so different. The length and depth of the responses was our first clue that something special was occurring in the school lives of these young people. Why did these students seem more invested to respond with care than those in the norm? Why were their remarks more about voice, choice, and curriculum?

Though we have more questions than answers regarding these letters, we did learn that these middle grades settings, noted for having highly evolved teams that employ democratic classroom practices, resulted in students who valued and expected mutual respect from their teachers and peers. These students, like the one quoted at the start of this article, had, in fact, higher expectations for teacher-student mutuality:

The primary thing that teachers should know about their students is the attitude to address them in ... letting the students do things on their own or in groups with minimal interference from the teacher is also preferred; unless (help) is asked for. This gives the students a sense of independence, and can build self-confidence. In conclusion, teachers should know just how far to get involved with students. If the teacher does this, they will be respected, admired and remembered by their students.

Another wrote:

Each one of us has good ideas and it is very helpful if you just talk with us and get them out. For instance, here we have conferences with our teachers every other week. It is very helpful. We get to express our feeling about what is happening and what is going well and not so well. Also I think it is very important to have a good relationship with your teacher. It makes you more motivated to work and learn.

And, last:

With youth, there comes detachment. Many teenage students break apart from their parents. What teachers don't realize is that school is a place to get away from the parents. Good teachers don't try to be the parents. Good

teachers don't try to be the parents to the kids while in school; they try to associate themselves with them. When I say, "associate" I mean that teachers should try to get to know their kids (not as teacher to student but peer to peer).

So, how do teachers familiarize themselves to reach the teens? Teachers have to understand that they cannot use force to control the kids. Surely the teachers have seen that students don't learn if pushed. "If you push, I push back harder!" many students think. Teachers have to leave room for (our) off days. If teachers don't the students dread going to class. The teachers have to make sure that they don't use treats (off days, food) as the main reason to learn.

Teachers have to let kids break apart from them. They shouldn't help the kids by talking down to them, nor should they go out of their way to help these kids. Teachers have to stop sending the kids to support groups or disciplinarians. Teachers have to try to be friends.

Be friendly. Make jokes. Give off days. *And don't target kids.*

It is clear that students from classrooms that explicitly value and engender student voice perceive middle school relationships and learning in qualitatively different ways. They rarely called for teachers to be nice and hardly mentioned the issue of homework. Instead, these students wrote about the power of relationships and the relationship of power, the importance of curriculum and their beliefs about their own learning. Although more data and analysis are needed, we speculate that when students have a significant part to play in a democratic classroom, they respond as anyone might respond when given a voice. They speak clearly and passionately about those things that matter in their lives.

The wisdom we found in this small collection of letters provided powerful insights on some areas needing our attention in middle school reform. In summary, notwithstanding the richly nuanced layers, the students represented in our sample asked middle grades educators to strive to do 10 things (Figure 1).

Listening to young adolescents in middle school

Are we willing to solicit, listen, and take seriously the voices of young adolescents? We would like to suggest a

Figure 1 Students' requests

Summary of Students; Messages

The wisdom we found in this small collection of letters provided powerful insights on some areas needing our attention in middle school reform. In summary, not withstanding the richly nuanced layers, the students represented in our sample asked middle grades educators to strive to:

- Know us as people and as learners
- Respect us as people/learners with important ideas and contributions.
- Understand our developmental nature and associated challenges.
- Know that development does not diminish us.
- Find ways to make the learning engaging.
- Teach us in different ways so we can all learn.
- Listen to us.
- Let us know you.
- Be kind.
- Be honest.
- Be hopeful and encouraging.
- Enjoy us!

few ways to proceed:

1. You might start in your school, team, or classroom by asking your students the same question that we asked: "What should every middle school teacher know about middle school students?" Analyze the data in your teams or even as a whole school community. Most importantly, examine current practice in light of students' expressed needs and concerns. Then, make the needed changes, being certain to share those with students.
2. Next, explore ways to have students more actively participate in making decisions regarding what and how they learn. We are not suggesting the traditional student council forum; rather, we are looking to advance decision making as an integrated part of classroom and school life for all students. Explore and invest in a wide range of democratic practices so that students can take control of their learning in collaboration with adults: student-led conferences, student self-assessment, planning the curriculum and assessment with students, leaning on student voice and choice in classroom life (e.g., developing a team or class constitution, letting students choose books they read, writing topics, research subtopics, and ways to demonstrate their understanding in a

unit of study) (Beane, 2006).

3. Rethink the traditional student council and replace it with team-based student leadership that will involve many more students and create a vehicle for nurturing student leadership.
4. Use the small learning community or interdisciplinary team as a small living model of a democratic community. Host community meetings, conduct surveys, and gather for celebrations. Other than large school-wide assemblies, our young people have few opportunities to participate as active members of a living community.

The young adolescents from whom we heard, suggested that middle grades schools are often challenging places in which both relationships and learning are not regularly rewarding. As we consider the kinds of schools we are hoping to create for our young people, listening to the voices of our students can lead us toward more honest, democratic, and responsive middle grades education.

Our aim in conducting this study was not to merely be nice or kind to young adolescents. Rather, we believe that young adolescents deserve to be heard and taken seriously. We find the current educational scene somewhat disparaging, as the scales seem heavily tipped toward education singularly prescribed by others. We believe that a middle school education should bring democratic practice to life, and, thus, should call us to, first and foremost, partner with the young people we serve. Bringing student voice front and center can nudge us toward education owned, at least in part, by those it claims to serve. This student's words capture many of the sentiments we have discussed, as he implores us to attend to the beauty in youth. We will let his words be our last:

I can imagine that teaching eighth graders must be pretty tough. Half of us don't even know who we are, so how could teachers understand us? It's hard, but I can think of some ways. First of all, it must be understood that we are all trying to fit in. Eighth grade is a hard year and everyone has insecurities. I'm not saying to walk on eggshells around us, but be aware that our emotions can change like the wind. Be firm, but understanding and strict but gentle. Also, we need to get breaks from class work and homework. We have a life outside of school. Parts of us wish we were older, but other parts wish we were still in kindergarten, playing in the sandbox. If it's

nice weather, don't give a lot of homework. You could even have us read aloud outside or something. We need time to breathe and enjoy life while we're still kids.

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