
Into the Hearts and Minds of Young Adolescents

If you want to know what the students in your school are thinking, ask them.

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Several years ago we began collecting responses from students in grades 5-8, to the prompt, “What do you think every middle school teacher should know about middle school students?” We collected approximately 2,700 unedited responses from diverse communities across North America, and we found them to be powerfully perceptive, delightfully honest, and incredibly wise.

Our goals for this project were twofold: First, we wanted to invite educators to partner directly with young adolescents in the decision-making process. Second, in giving young adolescents a voice, we hoped to encourage education policies that are owned, in part, by those it claims to serve.

What Young Adolescents Want Us to Know

After studying all of the responses through coding and analysis, we concluded that the most pressing concerns could be organized according to two big themes—quality relationships and quality learning.

Quality Relationships

A dominant theme in the responses was the desire to have positive relationships with teachers. The students said they needed teachers who truly knew them, genuinely enjoyed them, and were committed to working with them. One student wrote of the desire to be known and respected:

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. 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. We wonder what norms guide teacher-student relationships in those schools. In other schools, the requests centered on teachers having more respectful images of adolescents—images that do not label them as immature, crazy, or “hormones with feet.”

In addition to teacher-student relationships, students identified peer relationships as a powerful and often threatening force in shaping their experiences. They said they want

teachers to understand the social dynamics they encounter. One student explained:

I think every middle school teacher should know, or try to understand, the social whirlwind of statuses that forms and so quickly hardens 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 mix; everyone knows their place.... This network of statuses and levels is ever present in middle schools.

There were several hundred responses 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 at school. The students do not simply want friendly peer relationships; they want respectful, collaborative, and equitable relationships.

Quality Learning

Young adolescents care about school, and they want a meaningful learning experience. They want to know why what we teach them matters, and they want to be actively doing what real learners do: researching, writing, analyzing, presenting, collaborating, and thinking.

While some of our respondents spoke of fun, they often added the disclaimer that fun should not mean the absence of learning. For example, one respondent wrote:

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.

Young adolescents seem acutely aware of learning differences and want teachers to acknowledge, respect, and teach to those differences. For example:

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.

Many students wrote about decency and equity in relationships, and the importance of understanding learning differences. But they also left much unsaid. They talked about how they learned, but they rarely talked about curriculum. Instead, they complained about “too much homework” and targeted the volume of work they were assigned as an area of concern. It was as if they had come to accept schoolwork as irrelevant, and so they highlighted getting good grades or completing assignments as the core of what they meant by learning.

A Place to Start

We invite you to listen to the voices of young people as a viable source of data to drive school reform and guide school and classroom decisions. You can start by asking your students the same question that we asked: “What do you think every middle school teacher should know about middle school students?” Analyze the data in teams, during faculty meetings, and as a school community. Use the data to make decisions about policies and practices.

Next, explore and invest in a wide range of practices that allow students to be active citizens

in school, and to share control of their learning with adults. Such practices may include negotiated curriculum and assessment, voice and choice in classroom content and activities, and student-led conferences.

Will we listen to what middle school students say and look with care at our school practice? It will require that we look at relationships, analyze teaching practices, and build a culture of respect and collaboration. It's what they're asking for, and it's what we should deliver. In the words of one young person:

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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