

Elevating Student Voice

Student Perceptions Can Drive Education Reform

For decades, education policies across the U.S. have labeled students and schools with terms like at-risk, deficient or defective, needing to be fixed, or lacking in some way. Threats of school closure, school reconstitution, and even forced re-staffing have been proposed as ways to hold schools and staff accountable for the performance of their students. Most of the emphasis has been on the closing of achievement gaps and other deficit thinking¹ (commonly designated by test-based measures) rather than addressing broader issues such as resource variability or opportunity gaps perpetuated by society's inequalities.

Youth voices—specifically from students of color—are often not included in policy discussions, although recent findings² have suggested that listening to students, parents, and staff in schools and placing participant voice at the center of education policy discussions can improve the culture and climate in schools and communities.

Scholars have recommended that all students need to be viewed as whole people—support cannot be based on feeling sorry for students.³ As such, creating school environments that build and strengthen student-teacher relationships impacts other areas in school, such as student discipline and achievement. Additionally, research continues to show that students benefit when teachers share their race or gender.⁴

A report from the United Negro College Fund (UNCF)⁵ examined the perspectives of African-American youth on education and found that—despite past rhetoric—communities of color overwhelmingly want students to attend college and that African-American youth have high career aspirations. Results from the UNCF survey (based on students' perceptions of their learning environment) indicate that barriers to achievement continue to exist. Key findings showed that students felt that their race limits their opportunities, discipline gets applied disproportionately, and safety is a concern within the communities where they live.

The Student Voice Project

The Student Voice project,⁶ managed by Public Policy Associates, Inc. and supported by the Michigan Department of Education's African American Student Initiative, has collected data through student focus groups and interviews across the state of Michigan since 2014. The project examines the culture and climate as described by students and staff in their schools. The feedback collected helps researchers work with school and district leaders to develop culturally responsive action plans and professional development. The goal is to better listen and respond to student experiences in school. More than 800 students have participated in more than 50 schools and communities. Findings from Student Voice have provided an opportunity to learn from student perceptions to help inform policies that are supportive of

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students' expressed needs. Similar research supports examining teachers' expectations and assumptions about students' academic performance.⁷

Implications

Several insights have emerged from Student Voice research in Michigan schools including: the importance of community context and how positive relationships with teachers impact students and bias in schools. Students have reported that where they live affects how they are treated and race and/or racial incidents influence their education. Students have also reported that race still matters in school. According to students, bias is sometimes subtle in the form of micro-aggressions, attitudes, or beliefs of school staff and fellow students.

Questions to Consider

Questions that schools, teachers, and leaders could consider, include:

- In what ways can schools best support African-American students socially and academically to be successful?
- How can supportive relationships between students and teachers be strengthened and improved?
- What can be learned from schools currently employing culturally responsive practices?
- What needs to be done to move from deficit thinking to an asset-based approach recognizing the strengths within school communities?
- What local policies or practices can be enacted to reduce the number of students suspended and/or excluded from school?
- What supports are needed to increase student engagement in class and to make school more rigorous and relevant to students' culture and life experiences?

Suggestions for Practices and Policies

- Expanding building-level opportunities for schools to hear from their students, improving student-teacher relationships, and providing professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators on practices to support positive interactions with students using a culturally responsive lens.
- Increasing the number of teachers of color in school buildings such as through community-focused or Grow-Your-Own programs, improving school conditions for teachers and students, and creating sustainable teacher career pathways.
- Building awareness among community members about student and staff concerns and the lasting impact that bias can have on student success.

References

- ¹ Richard R. Valencia, "Introduction," in *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice*, (London: The Falmer Press), ix-xvii.
- ² Meredith B.L. Anderson, "A Voice at the Table: Positioning African-American Youth at the Center of Education Reform," *Brown Center Chalkboard* (blog), Brookings, June 19, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/06/19/a-voice-at-the-table-positioning-african-american-youth-voices-at-the-center-of-education-reform/>.
- ³ Tyrone C. Howard, Ty-Ron M.O. Douglas, and Chezare A. Warren, "What Works: Recommendations on Improving Academic Experiences and Outcomes of Black Males," *Teachers College Record* 118, no. 6, (2016): 1-10; Adrienne D. Dixson, Jamel K. Donnor, and Rema E. Reynolds, "Why the Post-Racial is Still Racial: Understanding the Relationship Between Race and Education," *National Society for the Study of Education* 114, no. 2, (2015): 1-4.
- ⁴ Clair Cain Miller, "Does Teacher Diversity Matter in Student Learning?" *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 2018, accessed December 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/10/upshot/teacher-diversity-effect-students-learning.html>.
- ⁵ Meredith B.L. Anderson. *A Seat at the Table: African American Youth's Perceptions of K-12 Education*, (Washington, DC, United Negro College Fund, 2018), accessed December 3, 2018, <https://www.uncf.org/pages/perceptions-a-seat-at-the-table-african-american-youths-perceptions-of-k-12>.
- ⁶ "Student Voice," *Public Policy Associates, Inc.*, <http://studentvoicemi.net/>, December 4, 2018.
- ⁷ Dorinda Carter Andrews and Melissa Gutwein, "Maybe That Concept is Still with Us: Adolescents' Racialized and Classed Perceptions of Teachers' Expectations," *Multicultural Perspectives* 19, no. 1, (2017): 5-15.

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