Speaking Up: Students' Perspectives on School

Students’ perspectives on school and learning, rather than being at odds with those of teachers, are remarkably similar, these authors point out. But teachers who do not perceive this congruence too often fail to engage students as co-conspirators in creating optimal learning situations.

By Patricia Phelan, Ann Locke Davidson, and Hanh Thanh Cao

A great deal of attention has recently been focused on conditions outside schools that affect students’ academic performance and their engagement in learning. Divorce, poverty, gang involvement, teenage pregnancy, immigrant status, substance abuse, and myriad other social factors are frequently cited as reasons why so many ado-

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conditions that influence what they do, how they feel about themselves as stu-
dents, and how they perceive their school as an educational and social setting. Of
most importance to practitioners and poli-
icy makers is the fact that many of the
forces students mention are objec-
tive constraints but factors under the con-
trol of teachers and principals. Fur-
thermore, these young people present a view of
themselves that may be surprising to
those who are convinced that the philos-
ophers of social problems precludes effec-
tive responses through school improve-
ment efforts. We find that, despite nega-
tive outside influences, students from
all achievement levels and socioeconomic backgrounds want to succeed and want
to be in an environment in which it is pos-
sible to do so. Interestingly, their views on
teaching, learning, and the school as
a workplace match remarkably well those
of contemporary theorists concerned with
learning theory, cognitive science, and
the sociology of work.

Students' Perspectives on Classroom Environments

"I hate school. "I can't wait for school
to be over. "Do I have to go to school
today?" These familiar comments by teen-
agets conceal their highly differentiated
views of classroom environments. In
fact, what students do not view school
in general terms at all. Each day
adolescents spend time in five or six dif-
f erent classroom environments, and their
descriptions of classes vary a great deal.

Most important, students say that they
like classrooms where they feel they
know the teacher and the other students.

While students appreciate a well-organized
and orderly environment, they do not like one in which the teacher is de-
tached and treats the classroom as a
whole rather than as a forum of indi-
viduals.

The class I'm getting an F in; he
seems like he doesn't really pay
attention to anybody in particular in
my class. We get a whole class, and this
is math. . . . So I don't know what he
really means by it. He doesn't look
at me.

Students want teachers to recognize who
they are, to listen to what they have
to say, and to respect their efforts. In class-
rooms where personalities are allowed to show, students respond more fully, both
academically and personally.

The setting for a person's development in
the classroom may be part of the reason
why the majority of students prefer class-
rooms with their friends. They say that hav-
ing classmates whom they know, trust,
and can depend on for help is extreme-
ly important. In classrooms with their friends, students feel less isolated and
vulnerable.

Indeed, some students say that their levels of participation depends
on the number of friends in a class — the
more friends, the more they are involved.

It also helps if you know people in
the class real well. "If you don't
know anyone, you're sort of just go-
ing your work and you're more like a
less assigned. If you can talk to some-
body about it, maybe make a connec-
tion or something, it's easier to get through
the class than if you don't know any-
body.

For some students, having friends in
a class is so important that they decline
to transfer to those appropriate academ-
ic tracks. For example, one student, as-
signed to a low-track English class, was
encouraged by her counselor to move to
a regular academic track. Although she
recognized the long-term benefits that could be derived from the transfer, she refused because her friends were in the lower track. Her past experience did not give her confidence that other, unfamiliar classes would be structured to allow her to make new friends. For this student and others, classroom organization that supports peer interaction will prove a greater degree of support and assistance in learning.

Another feature of classroom climate that students identify as important is the feeling of emotional safety. Although students say that they like to be challenged substantively, they do not like a classroom in which they are put down or made to feel stupid, either by the teacher or by their peers.

I like when they explain things now. If you have a question, I don’t like teachers that go, “No, we explained it once, and that’s it.” A lot of teachers are like that. They explain it once, and they won’t do it again.

Students are clear about classroom features that increase their involvement in learning. They also talk specifically about teacher attitudes, behaviors, and pedagogical methods that support and promote optimal learning environments.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH TEACHERS

Not surprisingly, students do differentiate among their teachers. But what specifically do they say? What teacher attributes do they see as important in supporting their academic efforts? A recurring theme among students’ comments is the tremendous value they place on having teachers who care.

It’s merely the way that the teachers treat you as a student — or as a person, actually. Because sometimes they’re just like, “Here’s the work. Do this.” And it’s not really good because people are just like that.

In fact, the number of student references to “caring teachers” is so great that we believe it speaks to the quick desperation and loneliness of many adolescents in today’s society. For example, one of the students in our study wrote a poignant story about a teenager suffering from severe depression that went unrecognized by his parents, teachers, and peers. This thinly disguised autobiographical statement talked about the young man’s desire to be accepted for himself and to have others around him who cared. When neither of these conditions was met, he died.

... because he had no reason to live any longer. Nothing to lose, or look forward to in the future. He died of a broken and lonely heart.

Although this piece of fiction is an unusual and no doubt extreme example of self-revelation, we do find that all students want to be acknowledged as worthwhile individuals. For some students, a caring teacher can help to reduce loneliness and isolation — conditions that work against involvement in learning. Teachers who demonstrate explicitly that they care about students are in much better position to win their students’ cooperation in academic endeavors.

However, there are differences in the way high- and low-achieving students define caring behavior. High-achievers often associate caring with assistance in academic matters. Such help demonstrates that teachers are aware of and concerned about helping students meet long-term educational goals. Direct interaction, therefore, is not always necessary. For example, caring can be expressed by a teacher who takes the time to read and critique a paper closely and to write comments.

They listen real well. And the teachers, they encourage you for good grades. Like if you write a good essay, they write a lot, you know, “good job” or “I love it.” And it means a lot. And I started writing better since I came here. More consistent.

Low-achieving students evaluate caring with certain personality traits (e.g., patience, humor, affirmation, ability to listen) and a readiness to give personal academic assistance. Low-achieving students frequently express a preference for direct, personal interaction.

She’s very tolerant and patient, and when you don’t understand, like during a test, she tries her hardest to explain it. She’s very caring. She’s always willing to help out.

Mica Asbaha: she’s very, very, very nice, she’ll talk to you. She won’t put you down, she’ll talk to you, and she’ll go, “Yeah, you know I love you. You know I want you to make something out of yourself, so we’re moving around in class.”

For these students, caring means the expression of interest and concern that goes beyond assistance with schoolwork. Explicit statements affirming their value and worth as individuals and encouraging that teachers like them personally are important.

The perception of teachers as caring or not appears to have direct consequences — particularly for low-achieving students. If a teacher is viewed as not caring, students report a lack of incentive to do schoolwork or to participate in class.

It makes a difference if I like a teacher, in how hard I work on the homework. Cause like, if I don’t like them very much, I go, “Okay, it’s not really worth it.” But if I do, then I say, “Yeah, I’ll try harder.” And I try some of the stuff.

It is not uncommon for low-achieving students to receive Ds and Fs in most classes while maintaining an A or B in an academic class that they describe as having a caring teacher. While many low-achieving students are aware of the consequences of poor academic performance, immediate personal problems and pressures can easily divert their attention.
from academic matters. Some of these students say that caring teachers legitimize their personal concerns and also help them refocus energy on such long-term goals as high school graduation. We suspect that caring teachers may be in a pivotal position to influence students who are tending to withdraw in school and withdrawal. The literature on at-risk students stresses the importance of at least one caring adult in the lives of children who achieve despite untenable circumstances.

In contrast, although high-achieving students say they prefer teachers who care, they generally receive high grades across subjects regardless of their feelings about teachers. These students have so thoroughly internalized goals for the future that they overlook, ignore, or rationalize classroom circumstances that are not optimal. Working toward their aspirations takes precedence over any immediate discomfort they may feel in a particular class.

Generally speaking, students mention humor, openness, and consideration as important qualities in a teacher. Humor and openness, in particular, serve to bridge age and status barriers and help connect students with adults. For example:

Some teachers, like they'll tell you stories about things that have happened to them, and you'd kind of relate to them in that way.

* * *

Teachers here need, oh, I don't know, to open up more, share their feelings with the students. You know, they seem like they're a recording or something when they talk to you.

* * *

I like it when they tell you stories about their families, when they make jokes and kind of like tease. Mostly telling experiences — joking.

Students want to feel connected personally to their teachers. When they say they like teachers who are open, they are not necessarily talking about teachers who reveal information about their personal lives. Rather, they want to know that teachers have thoughts, feelings, and experiences that both enrich and go beyond the academic content of the classroom. When teachers communicate excitement, enthusiasm, and active engagement, they who are considerate — who treat them with respect and are attuned to their needs. For example, one student described a favorite teacher as trying to coordinate her test so students didn't have four other tests on the same day. Alternatively, students express frustration that teachers frequently do not understand the pressures — academic, social, and emotional — that students feel.

In general, students categorize teachers as those who like students and like to teach and those who don't.

She's always smiling, and she doesn't yell or anything. And she's always nice to us. She shows us how to do things.

They know that some teachers would rather not be teaching, and they describe others who act as if they don't like teenagers generally.

I don't like my band teacher very much, cause he's kind of — he acts like he doesn't want to teach. He just goes for the paycheck.

A variety of consequences result when students perceive teachers as uncaring, disinterested in their work, or dismissive of adolescents generally. In some cases, students are compliant; they do what is expected but remain distant from the teacher and the learning process.

This pattern is frequently true for high-achieving students who do the work required to maintain their grades but are not actively engaged in the subject area content. In other cases, students are determinate and behave in distractive and disrespectful ways. Unfortunately, they also disengage from the process of learning. Still other students withdraw quietly — from the classroom, the teacher, other students, and academic endeavors generally.

**Pedagogy**

Students are remarkably current in their views about the "best" pedagogy. They concur with learning theorists and cognitive scientists about optimal instructional strategies. They prefer an active rather than a passive role; they prefer interaction rather than transmission.

I want to feel like I'm really being educated rather than just memorizing facts and forgetting them the next day. I'm not learning anything by that.

Perhaps the most rewarding theme emerges in discussions with students about pedagogy. It is that they want to learn from teachers, rather than simply read textbooks. Students unambiguously talk about their dislike of reading textbook chapters as an awning end-of-chapter questions sort.

I think if the teacher also does something more than just taking things out of the book or something. It's really better if it's not just out of the book. If she includes the students in everything. I think that's really helpful. Like what I was thinking about my science teacher, she never does anything new, and it's like all the same. You just read your (page) you go on, and do the questions. And it's not very interesting, and he doesn't explain about it much.

We have observed many classes in which students sit passively at their desks reading textbooks. Students interview describe these classes as boring and compare them unfavorably with those in which pedagogical methods encourage active participation.

Teachers who succeed in lecturing as a primary pedagogical method also this...
Students favor teachers who are willing and able to assist them in understanding the material through careful explanations.

When students participate actively, and when a variety of pedagogical methods are employed, students report a high level of interest and engagement, regardless of the subject.

Interviews and observations suggest that textbook teaching and lecturing are not infrequent methods of teaching. Students respond to this approach in different ways. High-achieving students seem to "grit their teeth" and comply with teacher expectations, low-achieving students more frequently withdraw and fail to meet academic demands. For some, the belief that education is irrelevant to their lives is substantially.

Students are often aware of their teachers' feelings, and they are able to understand why teachers may feel frustrated and discouraged.

When students understand the material and find the teacher approachable, they feel less alienated and less frustrated. Some are brave enough to persist in asking questions. Others are helpful in revealing their ability to comprehend.
Students are particularly disdainful of teachers they perceive as weak in subject-matter knowledge. They say it is hard to take seriously those teachers who are uninformed about what they are supposed to be teaching.

I don't like the teacher — it seems like I end up teaching myself. It's hard to learn when you are just left to learn on your own because he doesn't — I don't know if he really knows what he's teaching that well.

When teachers are inflexible and unable to discuss alternative points of view, they undermine the flexibility and ability of students to explore new ideas. Even more important, when teachers are not forthright about their own level of understanding, not only do students lose respect for teachers as individuals, but their confidence in schools and learning is undermined.

Finally, both high- and low-achieving students express a strong preference for working in groups. They say that group work helps them to generate ideas, provides a vehicle for getting to know other students, and allows them to participate actively. Here too, students are up-to-date with the latest in education circles. Furthermore, their reasons correspond to the benefits detailed by proponents of cooperative learning.

Where there's more than just you participating, when it's the teacher participating with you and the students participating with you — any one participating with you — it becomes interesting because you learn something about that person.

I like when you have groups in classes, you're not always like by yourself. I like working in groups, you get more ideas, you don't like just sit the whole time, more ideas are going around.

The one exception to the enthusiasm about group work is the objection raised by some high-achieving students who explain that they end up doing not only their own work but that of less-motivated students as well. In cases where moderately able students are instructed to work together and there has been no training in group participation skills, high-achieving students sometimes feel exploited. This tension is exacerbated when teachers or administrators do not communicate effectively to students the rationale behind mixed-ability grouping. For example, freshman students in an accelerated English class were given the following explanation for tracking: which was to occur the following year.

Every class in social studies will be mixed next year. There will be no more accelerated classes. They're putting you in these classes to help the other students, you know.

This kind of comment not only gives students inaccurate or incomplete information, but it also makes some resentful of working in mixed-ability groups. On the other hand, when individuals in heterogeneous groups have been trained to use cooperative learning techniques, both high- and low-achieving students report a high level of involvement in and as well as a high level of enjoyment of the learning process.

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

To date, school climate has been described almost exclusively in terms of the behavior of administrators and teachers. For example, collegiality and principal leadership are measures used to characterize the school as a workplace. However, schools are also workplaces for students. And, not surprisingly, we find that students are very much aware of and hold overall ambience of their school. They have identified their own "student measures" of school climate:

- visibility and accessibility of the principal;
- the collective message and level of support students receive from teachers and staff members;
- the perceived degree of safety and violence;
- types of interactions between student groups;
- student behavior generally;
- the availability of extracurricular activities;
- the general condition of school facilities;
- the latitude for student input into decisions.

Students are particularly aware of variations in school climate and describe them very vividly when they have attended more than one high school. They view their middle school as being very different from their high school. Their descriptions make it clear that they attach great importance to the collective message conveyed by the attitudes of the faculty.
Students' descriptions reveal that in some schools a feeling of tension permeates the air — and, in some cases, generates fear.

However, even schools in more affluent areas are not always free of violence or the threat of violence. Students' descriptions reveal that in some schools a feeling of tension permeates the air.

Like, it's just kind of there (laughing) — it's not overly looked at or seen, you just recognize it. Because, like, when you hear like, 'Well, he got me mad,' I'm going to his house tonight... and you come back the next day and, "Yeah, we kept his car," and so forth. I've got to walk around and try not to make one of those guys mad. If I ain't sett — if they find out where I live, I'll be screwed.

In these environments, students are on edge and watchful. They frequently believe that the worry and fear they feel are understood by teachers and other adults. "You try to learn to live with it and not let it bother you," said one student. He talked about the tension between himself.

In other schools, however, an overall sense of social cohesion is common. Students feel they are part of a larger community, where differences are valued rather than feared.

GROUPS AND MOVEMENTS BETWEEN GROUPS

Students' perceptions of boundaries between groups and how easily they can be traversed are important aspects of intergroup relationships. In schools where students segregate themselves, at least some extent, by racial and social class among groups. One black student said, "Our school is the only place I've felt comfortable." However, the ways in which students experience the boundaries between groups varies from school to school. In some cases, boundaries are fluid, and students move between groups with ease. Students describe this type of environment as one in which everyone gets along (for the most part) and they see less difference between students who are rearing to the school from other neighborhoods and those who are not.

The whole idea of everyone and the blacks and the Mexicans and the Chinese — everyone helps out everyone gets along. I have lots of good friends that are in [the northwestern section of town], everyone helps each other.

In this setting, boundaries are not as rigid.
crossed with relative ease, but, most important, students in other groups are perceived as benign.

Not everybody's in a group, but, like me—if my friends come up to me, I'll just talk with them and stuff and then they'll leave and somebody else will come up to me.

Lots of people, most people just walk around to whoever they want. Cause they have friends in all different kinds of groups. You know, if they want to come over and talk to someone else they do. So it's not really that hard to move into a different group, if you have some friends in there.

For these students, interaction between groups is seen as easy and unproblematic. Although students hang out with their friends generally, tension and fear do not prevent mingling with others. In other schools, the boundaries between groups are rigid, and students keep a distance from those seen as different from themselves.

I only hang around with Vietnamese because hanging around with Vietnamese makes me feel like I'm a part of them, and they know how I feel.

But then when I hang around with Americans sometimes, you know, we don't get along because I'm Vietnamese and they're American.

Students describe the ease with which they can traverse group boundaries as significant to their overall feelings of well-being. When boundaries are rigid and impermeable, students are more likely to attribute negative stereotypes to others, to separate themselves, and to view themselves as outsiders. The following descriptors, for a Mexican-American female and the second by a black male, illustrate this point vividly.

Well, yeah, the Americans [Caucasians]. . . . Some of them are a little prejudiced. Though, we hardly see that since I hang around with all my Mexican friends. Right? . . . I don't know, there's really nothing much to say about them. Most of them seem scared of Mexicans, you know. I don't know if it has to do with the past—something that they're scared of—guns or I don't know what. Cause I just... I smile at them. Cause they don't bother me. As long as they don't say nothing, everything's fine.

I don't really mess with the Hispanic kids because most of them are. . . .

"Either he's had a rough day at school, or he's really, really late for the school bus."
When standards of behavior are not agreed upon and conflicts are allowed to fester, students feel frustrated.

that do, in fact, break down barriers among student groups in schools. We believe that it is extremely important to understand school climate, including intergroup relationships, from the perspective of students. This knowledge provides valuable information about conditions that may affect the implementation of policies. For example, administrators attempt to promote cooperative learning or to disintegrate tracking may well be affected by the tenor of peer-group relationships, thus requiring supplementary strategies to ensure success. What is clear from our study is that the norms of peer-group interactions vary markedly from one school to another and have consequences of significance for learning.

STUDENT BEHAVIORS

Students also talk about the general behavior of their peers and how it affects the overall atmosphere of their schools.

Well, a lot of times they [other students] can make the faculty pretty uneasy. Just because the faculty's tired—especially the library staff—I guess the ladies are nice. I don't know them, but they seem to be always kind of on the verge of getting mad because people come in here and abuse the library.

For the most part, students dislike disruptive actions by other students, which they describe as affecting the quality of their own school experience. They are most comfortable in environments in which people's actions are predictable and in which values and beliefs about acceptable behavior are shared.

If they just don't want to learn, we don't want them here at all, 'cause the security guards are doing the job of keeping them in class, but I think they're tired of that. So why don't they just let them go? If you don't want to learn anything, you've got as well get off the campus. . . . And don't mess around with the people that want to learn. . . . We have a gangster group in my class, and sometimes they try to keep the other students from learning, and they try to get the teacher's attention, and the teacher gets really mad.

Students express a desire for adults in school environments to negotiate acceptable standards of behavior with students. They appreciate teachers and administrators who work with students to find solutions to problems that impede the learning process.

Students' desire for responsible behavior by their peers is almost always related to their desire to feel safe and comfortable in classroom and school environments. When standards of behavior are not agreed upon and conflicts are allowed to fester, students feel frustrated that their ability to engage academically is disrupted. Sometimes they find it difficult to take schoolwork seriously. The failure of teachers and administrators to negotiate acceptable norms of behavior makes students who are disruptive feel even more disenfranchised. They too feel angry as a system they perceive as carrying little about their actions.

When students "speak up," we find that their perspectives on school and learning, rather than being at odds with those of teachers, are remarkably similar. Teachers want to be respected and want to work with students who care; who exhibit humor, openness, and consideration; and who are actively involved in subject-area content. Furthermore, teachers want to be in safe and tension-free environments. Students say that they want the same things from their teachers and schools. Unfortunately, when teachers do not perceive this congruence, the result is too often an emphasis on differences and problems. Such miscommunication can lead to a perception of students as adversaries to be managed, rather than as individuals to be engaged as co-conspirators in creating optimal learning situations.