School Climate That Promotes

Student *Voice*

HEAR Me!

■ *Maurice J. Elias*

Students who don't feel heard or engaged are in danger of dropping out.

Promoting student voice paves the way to greater academic engagement and performance.

Students who can express themselves help create their own education.

All over the world, educators are recognizing that creating a school culture and climate that genuinely engages and supports all students is essential to increasing students' achievement and preventing students from dropping out (Klein, 2008; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Research supports the view that schools must encourage students to express themselves—clearly and often—and be places where students feel listened to and understood. Under such circumstances, a dynamic ethic of social participation is created that begins in the classroom and extends to the school building, the surrounding environs, and outward into the community. We appear to be rediscovering the psychological need of individuals for meaningful belonging; with the decline in cohesiveness among many families and communities, the school is once again a primary social institution for fostering belonging and building youth identity (Osterman, 2000; Sarason, 1996).

Defining Engagement

Engagement is best viewed as an ecological phenomenon involving the students and their contexts, particularly school, peer, family, and community (Reschly, Appleton, & Christenson, 2007). Although indicators of student engagement are often defined at the individual level (e.g., absences, involvement in extracurricular opportunities, approach to academic work, identification with school, and valuing of education), the organizational processes and climate of the school serve as barriers or facilitators to the behaviors, emotions, and cognitions that the indicators tap. The consensus of evidence is that the most powerful determinants of engagement appear to be instructional and pedagogical processes and the overall climate of the school. *Engagement* is definitely not synonymous with *entertainment*.

Students need social support from peers and teachers, and they benefit from seeing their schools as caring and fair, places where families and parents are welcomed and where educational success has value. In short, they want to see school as a place to which they want to go every day and as a source of pride. As a growing body of literature attests, when students are in schools with toxic, unsupportive climates, their health, mental health, and academic achievement are adversely affected (Cohen, 2006).

Top Six Activities to Enhance Student Voice

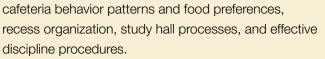**Genuine participation in school governance.** Students benefit when they are invested in the school structure through such activities as co-creating classroom and school rules; having a genuine and functioning student government; and serving on school committees, including those related to hiring (Mitra, 2008).

Buddies, mentors, and tutors. Even struggling students can help those who are younger or less able than they are; for highly talented students, the chance to share their knowledge or skills builds confidence and leadership potential. Peer support programs can be as grassroots as a school-developed program in which every student is either a mentor or a protégé to other students or be as structured as the Valued Youth Program, in which high-risk youth mentor younger students to prevent their following down the same path (www.idra.org/Coca-Cola_Valued_Youth_Program .html). Whatever program schools use, peer support programs can give virtually every student a good reason to want to come to school and stay in school.

Service learning and project-based learning. Because a picture is worth a thousand words, it's effective to go to www.edutopia.org for worldwide examples of how service and project-based learning work and how they enhance student engagement and commitment to school and academic learning. The key to these forms of learning is to ensure that students carry out all aspects of the service learning cycle— preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration—and that they have the social-emotional and character development skills needed to effectively enact the roles and responsibilities they have in working in a service setting or as part of a project team (Dunkelblau, 2009).

Students as researchers. Students know a lot about the patterns of schools—and of teachers— and empowering them to do research can build important academic skills as well as improve school functioning. Student projects include tracking whom teachers call on in class (e.g., as a function of sex, ethnicity, where students sit), student satisfaction with classes, preferred instructional methods, cafeteria behavior patterns and food preferences, recess organization, study hall processes, and effective discipline procedures.

Student community action teams. Particularly in high schools, students can be connected to community issues that are being investigated by local government groups, volunteer organizations, and community agencies. Community problem-solving groups directed at such issues as hunger, delinquency, drop out rates, immigration, housing, cleanliness, and health care are all amenable to student members who represent the school. Such responsibility—as well as the obligation to share it within appropriate classes, assemblies, school publications, and related venues— builds academic skills and leadership.

Opportunities for reflection. In all classes, students benefit from opportunities to reflect on the meaning of the material in the context of their lives or aspirations, on their own performance, and on the instructional and organizational process. Students should have chances to set some of their own goals, monitor their own progress, have choices in how they show evidence of what they have learned, and share their learning with others.

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Along these lines, Lee and Burkan (2003), in their comprehensive review of school dropouts, found unequivocally that the biggest reasons for dropping out are students' perceptions that teachers did not get along with them (or other students); had no interest in whether they succeeded or failed; did not care about them personally; and would not go the extra mile for them, even if asked. The most recent national High School Survey of Student Engagement from the Center of Evaluation & Education Policy at Indiana University confirmed these findings and further concluded that persistent failure and unappealing pedagogy were interrelated reasons for dropping out physically or psychologically (Azzam, 2008).

Lieber (2009) makes the insightful point that students equate classroom management, school discipline procedures, and the overall climate of safety in the school as a direct outgrowth of "caring." When bullying and intimidation (by students or teachers) is tolerated, when codes of conduct are not applied and enforced equitably across all school subgroups, when classrooms are chaotic and teachers are not prepared or their instruction is not pedagogically sound, and when the school is in physical disrepair, students feel as if the adults in charge of their schools don't care about them (Sizer & Sizer, 1999; Wessler, 2003).

Further, students are sensitive to what adults say about their future. Many leave school or, worse, underachieve because they do not have clear or realistic career aspirations, because the connection of their aspirations to what happens in school is tenuous, and because adults around them do not believe they will be successful in college (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Swanson, 2008). Although parental expectations are highly influential, there is no doubt that the message from educators is highly salient, especially from educators who are perceived to care.

Competencies to Foster Engagement

Intertwined with students' aspirations is the extent to which they have been given the responsibility and the skills to engage in meaningful tasks and projects. Promoting students' social-emotional and character development (SECD) is essential to students' being effective members of learning communities and problem-based learning and service-learning groups (Lieber, 2009).

This is one instance where educators may want to allow the tail to wag the dog—by giving all students, regardless of their prior levels of achievement and behavior, appropriate and personalized opportunities to engage in projects and service opportunities in which they have genuine input, voice, and interest, educators foster students' interest in learning what is needed for those valued tasks. Relatedly, when students have a voice into how their schools are run, they are more likely to be engaged in other activities in the school for which they may have less direct interest and see less relevance (Mitra, 2004). That is, to be good citizens of a school in which they feel themselves to be "shareholders," which of course makes the school a better place overall, students are willing to exert effort in subject areas for which they may have little intrinsic interest.

Although opportunity structures in schools are important, engagement is ultimately a by-product of the way in which students and their environments interact. Therefore, an essential part of any plan to increase student connection to school must involve elevating the importance of building students' SECD competencies.

In simple terms, SECD involves the capacity to recognize and manage emotions; develop understanding, caring, and concern for others; set goals and organize and plan for task completion; solve problems effectively; establish positive relationships with others; and handle challenging situations capably. Thus, SECD targets a combination of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions. Similar to the way students learn academic skills, they learn, practice, and apply SECD skills by engaging in positive activities in and out of the classroom. Initial skills that students have learned become

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enhanced, nuanced, and better integrated over time to address the increasingly complex situations they face in terms of academics, social relationships, citizenship, and health. SECD emphasizes finding and nurturing students' strengths and offering them opportunities to develop and express their own unique abilities in their everyday school life.

Promoting Student Voice

The challenge facing school leaders is how to operationalize these insights. Fortunately, they don't need to reinvent the wheel; interventions to promote student voice and engagement are plentiful and feasible. There is a bit more nuance and complexity involved in approaches that are likely to make lasting gains for students, as well as improvements in school culture and climate, but even those approaches are sufficiently well documented that there is clear guidance for school personnel wishing to encourage greater student engagement and promote SECD in their schools (Cohen & Elias, in press). (The Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning has resources available at www.casel.org.)

A great deal is now known about how to design effective activities for promoting student voice. Sometimes those activities can address deep cultural divides and be transformational in their impact. For example, middle and high schools students in Israel were given a chance to write about their "laws of life"—the key principles by which they want to live their lives (Elias, Ogburn-Thompson, Lewis, & Neft, 2008). In their adaptation of this program, groups of students selected a core value and wrote an essay, created a comic, drew a poster, generated a video, or created a sculpture representing how that value applied in their lives. One group of girls in a high school in an Arab

village in Northern Israel chose "freedom of speech" as the core value they wanted to focus on. With the support of their teachers, they articulated how they felt about male roles in their culture and how their village stifled their freedom of speech. In one poignant poster, a girl drew a newlywed couple where the moustache of the groom (a symbol of masculinity) covered the mouth of the bride. The caption of the poster expressed how the girls felt thwarted in their attempts to speak freely.

The project gave them a means of voicing their deep concerns in a constructive way, and they were supported by their (predominantly male) teachers. They were also allowed to express their views at a conference involving both Arab and Jewish high school students and staff members. The girls involved felt "heard"— they made a point of using this word instead of "listened to"—in a way they never before experienced. The three Arab high schools implementing this approach in 2009–10 are all continuing this work in 2010–11. They do not feel that they can turn back. In other contexts, less dramatically, giving students a chance to express their "laws of life" has consistently helped improve students' feelings of connection in school, support by school personnel, and engagement in academic tasks.

Some Caveats

Like any other powerful instructional activity, promoting student voice has its caveats. Fielding (2001) stated that the motivation of those giving voice must be genuine. As in the Arab school example, educators must be ready to hear unexpected, unwanted, or even uncomfortable news and potentially shift their relationships with students. Here is a list of questions schools should ask themselves before and during efforts to promote student voice:

- Why are we doing this?
- Why is this approach being encouraged or resisted?
- In whose interests is this? Who benefits and why?
- Whose voices are heard mostly clearly?
- Who is allowed to speak? About what?

Who is discouraged from speaking?
- Who gets heard? By whom? How?
- How will the school support people committed to student voice?
- Do we have appropriate systems and structures that support people who are interested?
- Are there public or communal as well as smaller, more intimate spaces to make recommendations and decide what should be done to promote student voice?

By focusing on these questions, educators move from "allowing" students some expression to genuine valuing of student voice and the perspective it brings to the school.

Conclusion

Around the world, educators and policymakers are realizing that unengaged students learn neither the academic nor the character lessons that schools are designed to impart. Those students often check out emotionally and intellectually even before they dropout physically. Fundamentally, lasting learning is the result of acts of co-creation in caring contexts, and that is what the pedagogy of student voice provides. Combined with efforts to create a safe, supporting, caring, and challenging school climate and explicitly promote students' SECD competencies, activities that enhance student voice and engagement are among the most powerful tools to reduce the drop-out rate and close the academic and opportunity gaps that still plague too many schools. **P**L

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