
PREFACE

The goal of this book is to help educators “see” schooling through the eyes of students. Because we know that relationships between educators and children are essential for this “seeing” to occur, we embed this powerful idea in trusting relationships. We also focus on “seeing” schooling through the eyes of students on the two dimensions that explain academic and social learning—academic press and supportive culture.

Why student eyes? The first point in this book is that students’ perspectives are often unseen in schools. They are often unseen because we do not seek them out. When we do listen to students, we often do not hear them, or so they tell us. We are too often focused on using student perspectives to reinforce what we have already decided.

Our second point is that when we inadequately see classrooms and schools through the eyes of youngsters, we miss opportunities to do our job more effectively, to improve our skills and knowledge in enhancing meaningful academic challenge, and to create caring and supportive learning environments. Worse, foregone chances often morph into costs. We not only fail to move forward, we foster conditions and states such as reduced sense of social integration, lack of motivation, and disengagement that run counter to our goals and hopes for young people. We are often only marginally successful in fostering the trust necessary for students to allow us to lead and help carry them to learning.

Our third point is that when we do fight harder to see the world through the eyes of our students, good things are likely to materialize: the understanding and wisdom that help us be more effective as educators and that provide meaning and joy to work that is often arduous and sometimes frustrating.

From here, the rest of the book falls into place. We undertake a journey to see schooling through the eyes of students. We begin by peering into how students see the culture of schooling. We collect and array their insights about the four cultural norms that define great schools—care, support, safety, and membership—and the essential elements that in turn compose each of the norms. We then explore how youngsters see teaching and learning in schools, using the essential elements of “engaged teaching” and “constructed learning” to collect and array these insights.

The summative message in these chapters is that we can do better. The fog of boredom and disengagement is prevalent in schools. There are avenues open to change this condition. But many of those pathways do not address fundamental insights that students tell us mark their lives in schools. This book explores these insights in the two core domains of schooling, the academic program and the culture of schools.

In the final chapter we spend considerable time exploring the relationship between what we see through the eyes of students and the work of scholars exploring the dimensions of effective educational practices. The critical conclusion here is that what students tell us is important to them is nearly isomorphic with what researchers tell us is effective in promoting academic and social learning.

Although by design we focus on what is absent, the goal of the book is not to underscore deficits, to blame ourselves once again, and to reengage in the ritual of self-flagellation. Rather, the intent is to help us remember and hold central the core idea that we and our young charges are engaged in a mutual enterprise, which in turn is forged in trusting personal relationships. Therefore, students need to be active players in the endeavor, not simply recipients of what we have to offer. If they are to take on this role, we must not only help them see the world of schooling through the perspectives and values of educators, but we must also become more adept at seeing the world through their eyes. It is my intent that this volume will carry us in this direction, revealing important strategies and markers along the journey.