

LISTENING LEADERSHIP: THE STUDENT VOICES PROJECT

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I really do wish the teachers knew how much this is affecting some people. Kids are getting really depressed over this and harming themselves. Not me personally, but I hear it down the grape vine. It's a really stressful period and having a butt load of school work piled on top really gets to some of us. I don't mind staying at home, but it's really the fact that the virus is straying closer and closer to my family is what I'm worried about. (8th grade student, Lancaster, PA)

The last day of school came, and I plainly said bye to my friends as if I were coming back the following week. Little did I realize, those days would turn into weeks, then suddenly into months. Interacting with others has been impossible, and I'm not going to lie, I'm not too fond of quarantine. Looking at the news seeing empty boardwalks, subways, and cities have impacted the way I view the overall situation. (8th grade student, Sussex, NJ)

The student voices project is a collaborative, story-telling initiative that was started in April of 2020 to encourage students of all ages to share their school experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak. I am a lead in the project and Head of School at an alternative independent high school in Brooklyn, New York. We sent the invitation to participate via email and social media platforms encouraging students, parents, and educators to participate in collecting student stories through videos, drawings, writing, photographs, and other media. In this piece, I draw on data gathered across our own professional networks by asking students to submit written, audio, video and/or artistic reflections and responses via Google forms and FlipGrid. Additionally, I looked to social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Facebook to survey the myriad ways student stories have been told during this time.

Recognizing that all of these platforms assume a level of privilege and access in order to participate in the sharing of these stories (Chilisa, 2020), I have sought in this work to interrogate the norms of crisis schooling frameworks dependent on device and internet access that have left a large portion of our student population without access to educational continuity in a virtual setting. Based on this, I seek to acknowledge the missing voices in our stories, highlighting that this erasure of experience is in itself a narrative that must be heard and attended to in education (Love, 2019). Reflecting on these trends, I seek to recenter student experiences and narratives, those shared as well as those absent, as a lens through which we as educators and educational leaders can examine and create more meaningful ways to engage student knowledges, resources, and needs in our schools and classrooms (even virtual ones).

By centering student reflections as a call to dismantle deficitizing discourse related to student identities and experiences (Annamma, 2017); this with the hope that these stories inform greater understanding of students positioned as central agents in the national narrative on education. I do this from my positionality as an educational leader, literacy teacher, and mother. I also recognize that my positionality as White, cis-gendered, economically advantaged woman in education, my work must center around the imperative to actively dismantle White supremacy culture in our work and in our lives and to lead with an anti-racist stance, reflecting on our own experiences of privilege, complicity and implicit bias that I seek to notice, name, and push against (Kendi, 2018). Thus, my "wisdom of practice" comes to bear as the connective tissue between the parts of this student voice whole. The following is a student submitted original poem as an opening example of students voicing their experience in the project:

"Don't Give Up"

One day everything is normal,
and then it's just not.

Spring is over and warm weather is supposed to be coming,
but it's just not.

I'm with my friends, sharing laughs at the mall, and then we're just not.

Everyone is scared, people are sick, they're supposed to be staying home,
but they're just not.

We should be happy, we should be at school with our teachers learning new things,
but we're just not.

We need to stay positive, we need to be strong.

When everything is against us we should just give up...

but we're JUST NOT! (8th Grade Student, Vernon, NJ)

The Host Has Placed You In The Waiting Room - A Leader's Vignette

The school I lead serves a population of students with diverse neurological and cognitive complexities when the COVID-19 pandemic which brutally and swiftly swept across the boroughs caused the city of New York to abruptly enter a shelter-in-place mandate. It is the first week of pandemic virtual instruction and we have set up a virtual "roam" document as a leadership team. Each day we drop in to classes to see how they are going, answer any "in the moment" questions and touch base, in any way we can with our students "in the field." Today, however, I am not in drop-in mode. I have been asked to meet with a teacher and student because the teacher is worried about what is happening in the household and how it is affecting the student. In fact, this student has logged into each class since the start of quarantine in her closet, as it is the only space she has peace and quiet and where she feels she can be herself. Teachers have reported hearing screaming and fighting in the background during classes and occasionally the sound of crashing objects. We are worried for her, but we cannot reach her. I am online, and the host has placed me in the waiting room. I am by myself in my home office, waiting to connect and all I can think is that our kids are in crisis, and we cannot reach them.

Acknowledgement of Context - Crisis Learning Plans in the time of COVID-19

In the fall of 2019, The National Center for Educational Statistics estimated that 56.6 million children across the United States were expected to attend an elementary, middle or high school, across sectors.^[1] In the middle of March, 2020, every single one of these 56.6 million children were sent home from school and told not to return, "until further notice", pending the spread of the COVID pandemic that was swiftly sweeping across the globe. On March 16, 2020, The US Department of Education issued a Fact Sheet: "Addressing the risk of COVID-19 in Schools While Protecting the Civil Rights of Students" (USDOE Office for Civil Rights, 2020). In this document, the USDOE outlines guidance for schools and administrators regarding compliance across CDC, Section 504, Title II and Title VI standards such that "[c]ompliance with CDC's recommendations should not create civil rights concerns. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) prohibits disability discrimination by schools receiving federal financial assistance. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II) prohibits disability discrimination by public entities, including schools. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI) prohibits race, color, and national origin discrimination by schools receiving federal funds" (www.nces.ed.gov, 2020).

Almost overnight, schools and administrators across the Nation got to work developing and implementing emergency school continuity plans that could protect students' rights to healthcare and rights to educational access. We developed plans as they were in the midst of a national crisis—an unprecedented pandemic. We were building the boat in deep water, throwing life jackets as we saw people drowning. Students were ripped from their schools, teachers, friends, and support structures—without any warning. Through this planning, it became immediately obvious that schools provide much more than just a learning space for eight hours a day—schools, in fact, are the backbone of the social system, providing more and accountable to more than any other public institution in this country. And, in this moment, as a mirror was placed publicly in front of the people, this system reflected back something that was alarming. The veil was torn separating home and school, society and self, revealing deeply embedded social structures rooted in inequity and, at the heart of this, lie the students. Wading through social distancing, quarantines, and online classes, students who began to find their footing (and not all did) began speaking out and sharing their opinions and experiences but who was listening?

The Student Voices Project

The Student Voices Project came out of the imperative to reposition student reflections and experiences as central narratives in the discourse on crisis education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This project also grew from wonderings around how students were coping with the abrupt changes in schooling - choices educational leaders had to make essentially overnight with no input from the students themselves as to how this would and could impact them. As I began to collect stories and reflections, it became clear that each student, unique in their own identities and contexts, was experiencing pandemic virtual schooling on a deeply personal level. One student reflected on how the uncertainty of the time mixed with the constant flux of her school's continuity plan was causing anxiety and confusion;

In the beginning I felt very very stressed and annoyed by the fact my school kept changing what we were supposed to do but now I have gotten used to it and it has been a lot easier to manage. I wish my school teachers would acknowledge how hard it's been not only for them but for the students and that most of the work had been catering nuero-typical students. (8th grade student, New York, NY)

What is so poignant in this reflection is how she was able to recognize the limitations in the structure of pandemic virtual schooling her middle school had chosen to follow - that as these choices were made on how to continue schooling, assumptions were also made by school leaders as to how students are expected to function virtually. Despite what we know about the social and emotional aspects of learning and the impact of dynamic social interaction and collaboration in classrooms, all seemed to

have gone out the window when transitioning to virtual, leaving some students scrambling on their own to develop their own social literacy in a virtual space, particularly students with cognitive or neurological complexities.

Another student noted how adjusting to “reading the virtual room” was difficult at first and how these adjustments have left him worried about how it might impact him as a learner moving forward;

I like staying home and sleeping but I don't like that we can't just raise our hands and ask questions like in an actual class. I think it will be weird going right from being home for what feels like forever right into high school. Honestly I do like being home so I really wouldn't mind if we don't go back to school in fall. I am wondering though how this is going to affect our classes and things that we are and aren't allowed to do when we do go back to school. (8th grade student, Vernon, NJ)

This reflection like a number of others we received also points to the value students place on knowing how to navigate the norms of educational spaces - as educators we often create these norms in the beginning of the year to enable students to participate in the classroom community in effective ways. Thrust suddenly into unfamiliar learning spaces, many students became unsure as to how they could participate as agents in their own learning. What were the expectations placed on them? How could they interact with each other and their teachers, or ask a question when confused? Could a series of videos really replace in person instruction? What happens to “in the moment” adjustment, adaptation and responsiveness to learner needs? Finally, how can students engage in best practices as learners when there was no common or consistent framework for schooling?

Indeed, students' experiences varied tremendously throughout school closures. Some students who had technology provided by their schools had no internet to access content. Some parents stayed home, some lost their jobs and others fought the front lines daily as essential workers. Some students received packets from their schools while others were thrust swiftly and without training into online classes. Through it all, the children were ferried through the cattle shoot of whatever plan for learning their school or district created.

One student shared in an informal conversation about how her school sent students home with nothing, and told them that they were not to receive any work for the duration of the school year. She shared that after the last day of school due to the shelter-in-place mandate, she had no idea what happened to most of her teachers or classmates. Her school, like most high schools in New York City, is primarily a commuter school, so few if any students from her school live near her neighborhood. That combined with the public transportation closures left her feeling isolated and on her own. She noted that while the school had voluntary check-in times, no one was taking advantage of them and she worried that when she returned to school, she wouldn't be ready to begin preparing for college. She felt so far behind.

Another student echoed this sentiment and dove further into the social complexities of schooling, worried that the transition back to “normal” may leave many students exposed to a variety of social and academic vulnerabilities that for some may have otherwise been mitigated at home;

I don't know how to feel about going back to school. I want to learn how we used to without the drama that follows. The question I have is the education worth the drama and mean kids it comes with. Going back to school is uncharted territory. Will it be the same as we left it? Will we be the same? After the pandemic has completely gone away if it does the lessons they teach us must be somewhat different from the lessons they used to teach to fill in some blanks that we must have missed during online school. I wonder how they will approach this in a way to teach us to keep pushing us forward but also teach us the things we missed without getting stuck in a grade below we should be. (8th grade student, Brooklyn, NY)

This project, as a leader, illuminated for me the extent to which our students think about, reflect on, know, and understand what does and does not work for them as learners. We, as the primary decision makers on educational frameworks, policies, and pedagogical methods should take the time to invite students to the table to share what is meaningful and what is needed for them to thrive in our shared educational spaces - virtual and otherwise. Additionally, through these reflections, I have come to see that our role as educators is to provide structures for ritual, routine, and rites of passage. Childhood and adolescence are times marked by a substantial amount of transition and change. In light of the global and collective uncertainty we are facing as individuals in this world right now, it is even more essential for students that we continue to provide the assurance and support these rituals, routines, and rites of passage mark in our student's lives (Imad, 2020; Ravitch 2020).

With this, and as I finish writing the fuller chapter, I leave us all with a clarion call and a critical question--our students are speaking, it's time to listen! *Are you ready for that*

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Source URL: <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-18-issue-1-fall-2020/listening-leadership-student-voices-project>