

# The Excluded Stakeholder: In Search of Student Voice in the Systemic Change Process

Roberto Joseph  
Hofstra University

Jonathan Kozol (1991) noted in his introduction to *Savage Inequalities* that "the voices of children... have been missing from the whole discussion" of educational change and the change process (p. 5). Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) have written specifically about the role of students as key stakeholders in the change process, and they point out that while educators and policymakers think of students "as the potential beneficiaries of change...they rarely think of students as participants in a process of change and organizational life" (p. 170, italics in original). Additionally, there are many who believe that students are not capable of making informed decisions. These people also believe that the classroom and school environments ought to be designed for and not with students. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) ask us "what would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of reform in schools?" (p. 170, italics in original). They posed this question over a decade ago, and research is only beginning to highlight a change in the role that students play in schools.

This article explores the literature on systemic change and student voice, and makes several arguments in support of student voice. First, I argue that the systemic change process is weakened in the

absence of student voice and stands a great chance of failing. Second, I argue that engaging students in student-voice activities strengthens their developmental and social skills, hence preparing them for the real world. Third, when students are engaged in student-voice activities, they feel empowered. Lastly, new teachers can benefit from listening to students by gaining deeper insight into their learning needs. The article offers important questions and practical strategies and activities for working with students in an educational change process. All those who have a stake in their educational system are urged to involve students in making school (re)design decisions. Lastly, this article serves as a call for research documenting the process of involving students in educational systems change and design.

---

## Understanding the Systemic Change Process

The term systemic change has very different meanings to different people (see Squire & Reigeluth, 2000). In this article, systemic change is defined as a fundamental change throughout all aspects of our public education systems. All stakeholders should have a deep understanding of the systemic change process. This understanding is the bridge to educational transformation. Communication and dialogue are the vehicles for bringing a diverse group of stakeholders together for a journey toward appreciating diverse stakeholders' values, beliefs, and opinions (Jenlink, 1995). Communication and dialogue among educational stakeholders foster the recognition of system relationships in society (i.e., among family, education, and community).

The journey to this deep understanding requires, first, an understanding that the ultimate goal of any systemic change process is to invent an educational system where all teachers succeed at helping students to succeed. Second, it is important to understand that to invent a fundamentally different educational system will require helping people to evolve their mindsets about education (Caine & Caine, 1997; Jenlink, 1995). *Mindset change* is the essence of a systemic change process. Third, it is also important to understand that during a systemic change process, much of the time is spent in small process teams (5–6 stakeholders) led by a process facilitator (Caine & Caine, 1997; Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, & Nelson, 1998). The major work of the process teams will be to: (a) develop a deep understanding of the systemic change process, (b) evolve their own mindsets and help the school community to evolve their mindsets about education through dialogue, and (c) envision, design, and implement an ideal educational system with active involvement of as many stakeholders as possible. Fourth, it is only through dialogue within

---

Roberto Joseph, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor in the Curriculum and Teaching Department, School of Education, Hofstra University, 119 Hofstra University, 264 Hagedorn Hall, Hempstead, NY 11549 (e-mail: Roberto.Joseph@hofstra.edu).

process groups that we can begin to help stakeholders evolve their mindsets about education (see section on Dialogue below). According to Bohm (1996):

The object of a dialogue is not to analyze things, or to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend your opinions and to look at the opinions—to listen to everybody's opinions, to suspend them, and to see what all that means. (p. 26)

It is argued herein that students have been left out of the systemic change process. Therefore, the remainder of this article will argue in favor of student voice and suggest questions, strategies, and activities that might serve as a first step in helping educators to include students in the systemic change process.

### **Trusting Students and Rethinking Their Role in Educational Change**

One of the touchstones of systemic change in education is obtaining broad stakeholder ownership (Jenlink, 1995). Educational stakeholders are the people in a school community (e.g., parents, teachers, students, civil servants, clergy, and others) that have a vested interest in the school systems in their neighborhood. Bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds who have a stake in the school system builds a stronger foundation for the systemic change process (Banathy, 1996). However, achieving broad stakeholder ownership is no easy task. How can students take ownership over a process that has historically left them excluded, silenced, and distrusted?

Cook-Sather (2002) highlights this rarely discussed issue in education: *trusting students*. According to Cook-Sather (2002), educational institutions and their policies and practices have always reflected "...a basic lack of trust in students and have evolved to keep students under control and in their place as the largely passive recipients of what others determine is education" (p. 4). These policies, perhaps created under good intentions to protect students, may actually be silencing their voices and even violating their First Amendment Rights (Hudson, 2003). For example, schools have monitored and banned certain books, established strict dress codes, censored student's personal Websites, used Internet filtering software to block content, and required students to walk through metal detectors. These policies highlight the point that educators do not trust students. Students, teachers, and administrators all have preconceived notions about each others' role in education. When you begin to bring different stakeholder groups together that would not normally meet on a regular basis to discuss big issues (i.e., systemic change), they begin

to reveal and challenge their misconceptions about each other.

Sarason (1995) describes what he characterized as "the political principle": "when you are going to be affected, directly or indirectly, by a decision, you should stand in some relationship to the decision-making process" (p. 7). When it comes to engaging students and other stakeholders in a systemic change process, Banathy (1996) transcends "the political principle" based on decision-making, to offer a political principle based on designing, and seizing ownership of designing a new educational system. In order for students to feel a sense of ownership in an educational change process, their roles would need to fundamentally change. They would need to not only be involved and to help make decisions, but also they would need to become creators, designers, and visionaries of a new and fundamentally different educational system (Banathy, 1996). Hence, new types of relationships and opportunities must be created that would allow students to come together with a broad range of stakeholders to envision, design and implement their ideal educational system.

As passive recipients, students have been silenced and excluded from the decision-making and educational-change process. Students are indeed the excluded stakeholder. Leaving students out of many decisions that need to be made in a change process can only reduce the chances of achieving a successful change effort, and, if excluded, students may resist and challenge the effort (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Cushman (2003) points out that with 60 percent of beginning teachers leaving the profession within the first five years, listening to student voices is imperative. New teachers may benefit from listening to students, by gaining deeper insight into what students expect from school and their teachers.

Mitra (2004) offers a different argument in support of student voice. She suggests that "students working with teachers and administrators to co-create the path of reform could help youth to meet their own developmental needs and could strengthen student ownership of the change process" (p. 654). When students begin to work successfully with teachers and administrators on important matters, they feel empowered (Cook-Sather, 2002). Only then can we say that stakeholders, including students, have total ownership over their change process and their educational system, because they would have designed it. A key ingredient for a systemic change process in education is broad stakeholder ownership—that includes students.

### **Guiding Questions**

If adults do not learn to trust students, systemic change may never be realized. One of the

cornerstones of systemic change is ensuring broad stakeholder ownership (Banathy, 1996; Jenlink, 1995; Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, & Nelson, 1996; Reigeluth & Garfinkle, 1994). If adults do not work with students to build trusting relationships, and if students are not involved in decision-making opportunities, then they will feel as though they do not have a stake in the change process and will not take ownership over it. It might be helpful for the adults and students to spend time reflecting and challenging their attitudes, beliefs, and misconceptions about each other.

Below are four guiding questions pertaining to student voice and participation that all stakeholders can address during initial reflections and conversations about educational change. These questions can help stakeholders to build an awareness that if students are left out of the change process, especially those students that have historically been marginalized (i.e. minority students, underachieving students, drop-outs, and students with learning disabilities), then the change effort is not likely to succeed.

- (1) *How can the adult leaders move towards including students' perspectives, building trust, and engaging in dialogue about the process of educational change?*

Ask students to participate in school and district-wide decision-making teams. All students should be invited, and everything should be done to try to include students that have historically been marginalized.

- (2) *How can the adult leaders in the school district community help students to become actively engaged in a change process?*

Provide students with developmental opportunities that will build their confidence while participating in meetings with adults. Listen to the issues that students are concerned about, and help to empower them to take action.

- (3) *What role(s) will students serve in the change process, and what types of activities will they be asked to engage in?*

Students can serve many roles, including: members of the school design team or members of a student leadership team. The key is to ensure that students become active participants in school decision- and design-making matters, which means it will be normal for students to meet regularly with the building principal, the superintendent, and community members to discuss issues relating to educational change. It is important for the student leaders to engage the rest of the student body in discussions about designing a new school. Student leadership teams might also meet regularly with new teachers to discuss various issues.

- (4) *At what point should students be invited to join the change process?*

Students should be invited to join the change process at the outset. Remember that it is important for students to be part of making the decision as to whether in fact change is needed in their school/district. If the adults wait too long to invite students to take part in the change process, students may be resistant to joining and may feel that all of the big decisions have already been made for them.

### **Student Voice in the Dialogue of Systemic Change**

While important, the guiding questions presented above are not sufficient to guide stakeholders in the process of developing student voice in their schools. Stakeholders will need specific strategies and activities to guide the process of developing student voice. Cook-Sather (2002) explains that because adults are not accustomed to seeking and including student voices in decision-making processes, it will require a change in mindsets and relationships. Furthermore, she states that bringing students' voices to the fore "means ensuring that there are legitimate and valued spaces within which students can speak, re-tuning our ears so that we can hear what they say, and redirecting our actions in response to what we hear" (p. 4). To begin addressing the challenges outlined by Cook-Sather, it will require that all stakeholders (with students as active participants) meet regularly to dialogue about issues pertaining to educational systems design. As mentioned above, dialogue may be a useful strategy to engage in to promote and develop student voice.

### **What Is Dialogue?**

Dialogue is a conversation method used to create and develop shared meaning within a group. A key principle of dialogue requires that all group members "suspend" their ideas and assumptions for all to see and critique without attacking the individual. For this principle to succeed, groups that include students as members must create a safe and respectful conversational environment. Another principle of dialogue requires that all group members learn to treat one another as partners striving to achieve systemic change (see Bohm, 1996; Jenlink, 2001; Senge, 2000). This latter principle of dialogue may perhaps be the greatest challenge for adults.

### **Suggested Activities to Develop Student Voice**

In addition to using dialogue as a strategy, educators can engage in various activities to further develop student voice in the systemic change process. The activities serve as guidelines for practice.

The activities fall under three main themes: (1) listening to student voices; (2) students as researchers, and (3) students as educational systems designers.

**Listening to student voices.** Corbett and Wilson (2002) interviewed approximately 400 inner-city middle and high school students in Philadelphia. They interviewed the students over a three-year period during the implementation of a district-wide reform effort. Other researchers have conducted large-scale surveys of student opinions (MetLife, 2002).

Shultz and Cook-Sather (2001) engaged 28 middle and high school students in writing about their experiences in school. The students who participated were from urban, suburban, and rural schools. The goal was to foreground student voices in conversations about school reform.

**Students as researchers.** Fine *et al.* (2005) engaged students as researchers to understand their experiences of racial/class justice and injustice in their schools. The students were from different urban and suburban schools in the United States. According to Fine *et al.* (2005), the student researchers played a vital role in all facets of the study's design, implementation, interpretation, and dissemination: "collaboratively we created a survey focusing on youth views of distributive, procedural and inclusionary (in)justice in the nation and their schools" (p. 501).

The student respondents were from 11 suburban high schools, four small urban high schools, one large high school, and one activist based community organization. Fine *et al.* (2005) state that the survey was completed by 9,174 ninth and 12th graders. They also conducted 32 individual and 24 focus group interviews. Students published the results via performances that are available on a DVD: *Echoes: Youth Documenting and Performing Brown 50 Years Later*, to document the original research, spoken word, and movement of youth. In this study, Fine *et al.* (2005) clearly engaged students as researchers; however, the purpose of the research was in effect to listen to student voices.

In another study, Oldfather (1995) worked with a group of middle school students for five years. She was able to work with them through their transition to high school. The purpose of her research was to discover "what can happen when they [students] engage directly in conducting research about their own processes of learning and motivation" (p. 131). Initially the student's were involved in developing research questions and were the participants of individual and focus group interviews. By the end of the first year, students learned to use constant comparative analysis by helping to verify and clarify the emerging themes from their interview transcripts. During the second year, the students began

presenting the findings of their study at national educational conferences. By the end of the study period, the student found that "their voices were invited, responded to, acted upon, and honored" (p. 135). The students and researchers in this study saw themselves as partners; they were co-researchers.

**Students as educational systems designers.** Nowhere in the literature does one find evidence of students engaged in the redesign of their educational system. Ultimately, the goal is to train students to become designers of new educational systems. In order for this goal to be attained, students first need to be listened to and trained to conduct research in their school and community.

### Summary of Student Voice Activities

1. *Conduct individual interviews with students* prior to, during, and following a school or district-wide change effort (Corbett & Wilson, 2002; Cushman, 2003).

2. *Engage students in writing exercises* that prompt students to reflect about their experiences in school or during a change effort (Cushman, 2003; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001).

3. *Administer needs analysis surveys, and hold open forums.* Find out what your students need, and how they learn best (Johnston & Nicholls, 1995; MetLife, 2002). Find out whether students think systemic change is needed. Hold regular open forums, perhaps in the form of a school assembly, where conversations about schools can take place. Often students do not have a place to voice their concerns about practices that occur in their school or other schools. Train students to analyze the results of the needs analysis survey, and to share the results with the other students during an assembly.

4. *Engage and train students to be researchers.* Hold research camps where students can learn to design and conduct research studies. Student can conduct a study to find out the experiences of their peers with sensitive matters in their school (Fine *et al.*, 2005). Students can also conduct research about their own learning and motivation processes (Oldfather, 1995).

5. *Form diverse student leadership teams* to identify school problems and to develop and implement strategies for school improvement (Mittra, 2004). The leadership team may decide to conduct individual interviews with various students to help in identifying problems, and in developing strategies for school improvement. The student leadership teams can meet regularly with the building principal and superintendent. The student leadership team can have as a main focus systemic change in education. The student leadership team should be in constant communication with the student government.

6. *Conduct student-run focus groups.* Form focus

groups with students that are often marginalized (Fine *et al.*, 2005). Find out what they need. They could have great insight into the design of a new school system. Focus questions might include: What do you like about your school? What would you improve about your school? If you could design a totally new school system, what would it be like?

7. *Administer course evaluations.* Throughout the semester and on the last day of class, have open conversations with your students on how they might redesign the course. At the K–12 level students are rarely asked to evaluate a course or a teacher for the purpose of redesigning the course.

8. *Engage students as educational systems designers.* Students can be invited to serve on design teams. The function of these design teams would be to brainstorm ideas and create various designs of a new school system.

These activities have the potential to not only help educators to create a space that includes the voices of students but can also serve as a catalyst to significantly transform the educational landscape.

---

### Final Remarks

Bringing stakeholders together who have diverse backgrounds, experiences, and opinions strengthens the change process. If voices of students are left out, particularly the voices of those who have been historically marginalized, then the change process is weakened and is more susceptible to adverse reactions from these very same stakeholders. Adults have to begin to learn to trust students to take a central role in the educational change and design process. Engaging students in student-voice activities not only benefits the change effort, but it also encourages the development of the students. Problem-solving and decision-making are developmental skills that all students have to learn to survive in the real world. What better way to teach student these skills than by inviting them to help make decisions that pertain to school or district-wide problems? Students will become empowered to take ownership of the systemic change process, thus enabling them to create an innovative educational system. Use the questions, strategies, and activities outlined in this article as a guide on a journey in the search for student voice in any systemic change process. □

---

### References

- Banathy, B. H. (1996). *Designing social systems in a changing world*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Bohm, D. (1996). *On dialogue*. London: Routledge.
- Caine, R. N., & Caine, G. (1997). *Education on the edge of possibility*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

- Cook-Sather, A. (2002). Authorizing students' perspectives: Toward trust, dialogue, and change in education. *Educational Researcher*, 31(4), 3–14.
- Corbett, D., & Wilson, B. (2002). What urban students say about good teaching. *Educational Leadership*, 60(1), 18–22.
- Cushman, K. (2003). *Fires in the bathroom*. New York: The New Press.
- Fine, M., Bloom, J., Burns, A., Chajet, L., Guishard, M., Payne, Y. *et al.* (2005). Dear Zora: A letter to Zora Neale Hurston 50 years after Brown. *Teachers College Record*, 107(3), 496–528.
- Fullan, M., & Stiegelbauer, S. M. (1991). *The new meaning of educational change* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hudson, D. L. (2003). *The silencing of student voices*. Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center.
- Jenlink, P. (1995). *Systemic change: Touchstones for the future school*. Arlington Heights, IL: IRI/Skylight.
- Jenlink, P., Reigeluth, C. M., Carr, A. A., & Nelson, L. M. (1996). An expedition for change. *Tech Trends*, 21–30.
- Jenlink, P., Reigeluth, C. M., Carr, A. A., & Nelson, L. M. (1998). Guidelines for facilitating systemic change in school districts. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 15(3), 217–233.
- Jenlink, P. M. (2001). Activity theory and the design of educational systems: Examining the mediational importance of conversation. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 18, 345–359.
- Johnston, P. H., & Nicholls, J. G. (1995). Voices we want to hear and voices we don't. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(2), 94–100.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: Crown.
- MetLife. (2002). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher 2002: Student life: School, home, & community*. New York: MetLife.
- Mitra, D. L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record*, 106(4), 651–688.
- Oldfather, P. (1995). Songs "Come Back Most to Them": Students' experiences as researchers. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(2), 131–137.
- Reigeluth, C. M., & Garfinkle, R. J. (Eds.). (1994). *Systemic change in education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.
- Sarason, S. B. (1995). *Parental involvement and the political principle: Why the existing governance structure of schools should be abolished* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Senge, P. M. (2000). *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education* (1st ed.). New York: Doubleday.
- Shultz, J., & Cook-Sather, A. (Eds.). (2001). *In our own words: Students' perspectives on school*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Squire, K. D., & Reigeluth, C. M. (2000). The many faces of systemic change. *Educational Horizons*, 78(3), 145–154.
- Tyack, D. B., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.