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The Empowered Student

Releasing the Reins

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Three simple ways to give students agency—and gather good feedback.

We often think of the nuts and bolts of education as being an adult responsibility. We get our classrooms ready each fall with incredible decorations, plan lessons that are aligned to the standards, integrate strategies for differentiation, and then provide our students with feedback about *their* performance and how we believe they can grow as learners.

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But what if it doesn't have to be this way? What if teachers and students took *equal* ownership of the classroom? We firmly believe that "students hold the key that could unlock the mysteries that adults sometimes miss" (Coda & Jetter, 2018). That's why we must be brave enough to ask hard questions, be open enough to listen, and be wise enough to act when students voice their opinions. What better way to continuously meet the needs of the modern-day student than to involve them in the process of teaching and learning? "Releasing the reins" to our students might feel risky and uncomfortable, but it has rewards far beyond what we can imagine.

In the Let Them Speak! Project, a movement devoted to hearing what students have to say about what's going on in schools, we interviewed hundreds of students and educators across the nation. Some students shared positive experiences with empowering educators, while others shared personal struggles with disengagement, a lack of motivation, and a disconnect from the real world that exists within an adult-led system. Throughout the discussion process, educators asked for deeper insights into creating a true partnership that empowers students.

Although there are many entry points to student empowerment and agency, the following three action-oriented practices improved the culture in our own classrooms when we taught, as well as 2student ownership and community engagement. Consider the following practices that help create a partnership *with* students in order *for* students to learn better.

The Bare Classroom

Educators work hard and always mean well. They spend their own money (an average of $459 per year) to purchase classroom supplies that schools are unable to cover with their slim budgets (García, 2019). When we

first started teaching, we, too, poured money into doctoring up our bulletin boards, purchasing posters that outlined the "writing process" or multiplication tables, and stocking binders full of eye-catching stickers and dividers. We designed signs that carefully outlined our classroom procedures and we provided organizational trays and file folders to neatly collect student work. From purchasing pencils and folders to beanbag chairs and bookshelves, we wanted to make the environment inviting (from day one) so that our students felt comfortable and organized in the way *we* thought they should be.

But then we changed course. In the Let Them Speak! Project, we asked students, "What have we failed to recognize about you or your experience as a student at our school?" We discovered that students across the nation wanted to feel more comfortable in their learning space and oftentimes didn't enjoy the theme or décor that the teacher selected. Returning to the classroom himself, Rick decided to initiate the "bare classroom approach" as an intentional strategy and method for activating student voice and creating a partnership with his students. He made room for them to exert their own voice, choice, and leadership ideas in the physical makeup of the classroom. Here are some simple steps to create a similar partnership with your students:

Step 1: Start a "bare" classroom. When we say bare, we mean *bare*. You can start this at the beginning of the school year or a new semester. Only keep the necessities. Teacher and student 3furniture, school supplies, books and resources, a phone, and computers do not have to be removed, of course. Think about what students need to learn, share it with them, and gather feedback about how the classroom should be set up to address skill-based learning. Store-bought posters and signs can be replaced with student-designed bulletin boards and decorations that attend to these skills.

Step 2: Teach design lessons to your students to prepare them for setting up the classroom. Using grid-lined paper or sketchbooks, work side-by-side with students to design furniture placement, location and organization of materials, and flexible seating arrangements. Talk about procedures for reading and writing, organization and efficiency, and even feedback and conferencing structures. How are things going to operate while creating a successful classroom conducive to intense learning?

Step 3: Talk about a realistic budget and discuss what materials you could use to decorate the room. Most teachers receive a nominal stipend for supplies, but many times it isn't enough to cover them all. Last year, we observed classrooms taught by innovative, student-empowering teachers from Arizona to Arkansas to New York. In these classrooms, walls were covered with student brainstorming on all sorts of topics. Sticky notes littered bulletin boards in response to questions like, "What makes a good teacher? What makes a good school?", "What do you like to read?", "What are your goals for this class?", and "What is something that teachers might do that drives you crazy?" This type of mind mapping (or anchor charts) allows student thinking to become visible and builds a classroom culture of mutual trust. Plus, it creates an archive of topics and issues, a showcase of ideas where students see that they matter when they enter the classroom.

Step 4: Allow students to present their design renderings of the room and develop a proposal for setting up the furniture, decorating the walls, and organizing the materials. You may need to negotiate or blend some ideas together, but the goal is that every student is heard! Given the creativity of students, however, one cannot possibly implement every idea that is presented. Don't feel bad if you need to hold a democratic vote where students prioritize their greatest needs and make decisions swiftly, together. Students appreciate the voting process because they know you cannot spend a month debating minor details. After the environment and wall space is initially set, you will want to revisit the design with your students periodically. This ongoing feedback loop creates what Dewey saw as a true learner-centered democracy (Dewey, 1916).

"Sacred" Lesson Planning

Most would agree that lesson planning is hands-down an adult responsibility. Teachers plan their assessments, units or modules, and daily lessons that highlight the skills and standards that students need to

learn. Many districts even have a set curriculum and scope and sequence to consider. Teacher observations rely on having solid lesson plans in place. But what if we told you that it is OK to release the reins?

Teachers have the pedagogical freedom to influence the art and science of "how" to teach. They put together creative hooks, resources, and video clips, and prepare for small-group reteaching or whole-class instruction. They differentiate learning in online platforms with a flipped classroom experience. Or they plan cooperative learning activities that are designed to engage even the most introverted students. But is this necessarily the best way to do things? It may be for teachers, but it might not be for students. Have you ever given students a preview of your standards or lesson 5plans for the week? How might your students' creative ideas make your lessons much more powerful and relevant to them? Can you ask your students about how to best *deliver* a lesson?

We recently observed a teacher constructing a poetry/hip-hop unit for her students. There were so many positive elements to her lesson plans. Yet she decided to create a partnership with her students and let them co-design a new lesson. Her students expressed wanting to create poetry memes that highlighted lyrics from *their* favorite songs. This wasn't what the teacher had in mind to do, at first, but she let her students take the reins, and the lesson was a hit! Students were highly engaged, and the use of new vocabulary and rhythmic strategies for reading their poetry aloud was successful.

Here is what she did to design more powerful instruction for her students. Consider replicating these steps in your own classroom:

Step 1: Share the instructional goals and unit for at least one week's worth of upcoming lessons and how things will be designed for the sharpening of a particular skill-set. This takes time but is extremely important. It is the art of sharing learning objectives and agendas before the instruction ever takes place.

Step 2: Ask students for creative ideas, resources, or delivery strategies to enhance your lessons. Students may come up with sketchnoting, video or even AR/VR productions, songs, memes, or other media that can be integrated into the lesson itself or through new, creative anticipatory sets. What we have learned from visiting with students through the Let Them Speak! Project is that the number one problem that exists in education from their point of view is *boredom*. The reality is that adults either drive such boredom or take a guess on how to engage students. Spice up your lessons by asking your students for the spice.

Step 3: Once the lesson is tweaked according to student input and carried out, don't hesitate to solicit student feedback about how things went.

Opening the Feedback Loop

If we want our students to become *true* partners in their own learning and let go of the belief that there are *separate* adult and student responsibilities, then we have to be vulnerable enough to set aside our adult egos by soliciting honest feedback from our students. Through student surveys, brief written narratives, and open discussions, students provide suggestions on ways that teachers can better meet their needs. But do we invite the same thing from our students about our own teaching craft and abilities?

Picture this: You are teaching a series of lessons that feed into a larger unit. It takes about three weeks to complete your work with students. Have you asked your students at the end of the unit how things went? Have you considered creating leadership opportunities where students facilitate feedback sessions about how to make class better? We recently observed a teacher intentionally opening the feedback loop by activating student voice through the following process—one that we recommend all teachers try:

Step 1: Train students how to facilitate a brainstorming session. Teach them to not only record ideas and gather information, but to *respectfully* engage in discussions with their peers. Beforehand, you may want to consider referencing your student-generated classroom norms or social contract, assigning a facilitator, and inviting students to write down their thoughts if they prefer to not verbally engage. Model how this might look

or sound through a think aloud. Have the class choose a captain by using an equity-based selection process, like an electronic name randomizer, rather than a popularity contest.

Step 2: Sit in the back of the classroom, give students sticky notes, and have the student captain deliver three key questions for the brainstorming session: (1) What did you like about this week's lessons? (2) What feedback do you have to make the lessons better? (3) In what ways can your teacher make this class a better experience? The captain may categorize the sticky note responses on the chart, clarify, or ask follow-up questions to ensure consensus on feedback for the teacher. This process is about trust and mutual collaboration. If students derail and get silly with the process, you can simply redirect the class and let them know that they can revisit the feedback cycle at a later time. Gathering student voice doesn't have to be forced.

Step 3: The student captain should summarize the classroom feedback and provide the teacher with doable and reasonable things to consider in planning future lessons. This exercise builds student leaders' facilitation skills in a way that their voices will be heard and their time will be respected. And, don't forget … even younger students can carry out this process extremely well.

Trust the Process

These are just three powerful ways to increase student agency and empowerment. Intentionally planning for rigorous standards and curriculum that are aligned to relevant lessons can create an even greater punch when they are planned *with* students rather than *for* students: "Students may not have all the answers at the time that we expect answers, but if you trust the process and assess what needs to be examined, they will come through for you with incredible insights—things that we often would not think of on our own. The partnership between students and educators is essential for reform, rejuvenation, or the transformation of any classroom or school" (Coda & Jetter, 2018). It's time to release the reins.

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