
EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

RESEARCH ABSTRACTS

TOPIC: Effective Instruction

CITATION: Corbett, Dick and Bruce Wilson, "What Urban Students Say About Good Teaching," *Educational Leadership* 60, 1 (September 2002): 18-22.

What Did the Researcher Do?

As educational reformers call for public input on school reform, there is one stakeholder group they frequently neglect to consult—the students, whose lives can be transformed by positive change. In this study, the authors sought to include students' voices in educational reform efforts being instituted in the city of Philadelphia, when a district-wide reform known as Children Achieving was initiated. During that period, the researchers interviewed inner-city middle schoolers annually for three years while their schools were undergoing reform. The students selected came from six of the lowest-income schools in the city and represented a range of attendance and achievement patterns. "Each year, we asked them to talk about their daily instructional routines, the classes in which they learned the most and least (and behaved the best and worst), how they preferred to learn and which classes accommodated this preference, what they thought good teaching was, and where in their schedules they encountered it. We hoped to discover through these conversations whether school reforms had actually changed the educational experiences of students." (p. 18)

The researchers were able to follow some of these students into high school. Several of the middle schools in the study fed into high schools that had adopted the Johns Hopkins Talent Development Model, which switched all high school grades from the traditional seven-period day to a block schedule in which students took four classes each semester. Each class ran from 80 to 90 minutes. This allowed students in the study, who were first interviewed as middle-schoolers, to observe the differences between their ninth- and tenth-grade experiences.

What Did the Researcher Find?

In their discussions with the researchers, the students "never wavered in identifying their teachers as the main factor determining how much they learned, and they spoke with one voice when describing good teachers." (p. 18) When the students talked about the value of education reforms (specifically the Talent Development Model's block schedule), they judged such reforms on the basis of their effects on teacher behavior that aided student learning.

The researchers found that students repeatedly mentioned six qualities of good teaching. Although these urban students were frank in their acknowledgment "that their default response to most assignments was to ignore them . . . nevertheless, students liked teachers who successfully combated this habit." (p. 19) As one student explained, "If they don't keep after you, you'll slide and never do the work." (p. 19) Teachers kept after students in many different ways—regularly checking homework, offering quiet reminders to individual students, calling parents, and giving rewards.

Students agreed that good teachers maintained order. One commented that when "the teacher is hollering and screaming...it just messes it up for you." (p. 19) Another student pointed out, "I want a teacher strict enough for me to learn." (p. 19)

Good teachers are willing to help in ways that accommodate different students' learning styles. A good teacher makes sure that all students understand the subject matter being taught, and is willing to give extra help to those students who need it. Students recognized that a good teacher can break the cycle of failure experienced by so many of these urban students. One commented about a classmate who did no work in class at the beginning of the year. "Now he does . . . 'cause the teacher took time to help him and talk to him." (p. 20)

Good teachers explain until everyone understands. Students liked teachers who stayed with an assign-

ment, offering repeated explanations until everyone in the class understood the material. On the other hand, students were disturbed by those teachers who would say something like, "I've already told you this; you should have listened the first time." (p. 20) While such teachers may sometimes be justified in their frustration, the researchers note that to the students, such a comment means, "I refuse to teach you." (p. 20)

Good teachers vary classroom activities and consider students' learning preferences, whether they be for working in groups, listening to the teacher talk, reading a book, doing worksheets, participating in whole-class discussions, and doing hands-on activities. While commenting on specific activities, students showed that they realized their own preferences to engage in activities that helped them to learn best.

Good teachers try to understand students. "Kids want teachers who believe in them," one said. (p. 20) Students particularly appreciated teachers who realized that student misbehavior often reflects issues outside of school and is not necessarily targeted at the teachers.

"Students clearly expressed the belief that good teaching was important because it made them learn better. . . . Unfortunately, it was not unusual for these students to spend a semester or an entire year in a core subject in which they learned nothing, most often because they experienced a revolving door of substitutes or a new teacher who was not equipped to meet the challenges of an urban environment. . . . Students defined learning 'better' as 'getting the work right,' 'understanding something a teacher already tried to teach,' and 'getting stuff we haven't had before.' . . . And because they cared about learning, it mattered greatly to students how often they encountered good teachers." (p. 21)

Students judged any instructional changes initiated by school reformers according to whether these changes promoted better teaching and, in turn, greater learning by students. With regard to high school block scheduling instituted the year they entered, students predictably complained about the length of the classes—they said that classes got boring and the teachers talked too long. Still, when asked if they preferred seven periods a day to four, 107 out of 148 ninth and tenth graders said they preferred four. None of the 41 students who preferred seven periods a day would say they worked better in the shorter classes. Generally, all agreed

that they learned more in the longer classes because the teacher cared more about learning. "Students tended to adopt the kind of single-minded, uncomplicated focus on improved school and classroom practices that the experts frequently urge education stakeholders to use when making strategic decisions." (p. 21)

What Are Possible Implications for School Improvement?

When discussing effective school reform, we are often advised to involve all relevant stakeholders. Most of the time we take that to mean teachers, administrators, other staff, parents, and even community and business members. One group is often overlooked when planning and implementing school improvement strategies: the students. This study shows that students can provide important insights into the success of current reform and ideas about what's important to students in considering future reforms. Soliciting this input also communicates to students that their ideas and opinions are valued and respected.

Rather than asking whether students care about learning, we might better ask, What can schools do to support and reinforce adult actions that demonstrate to students that the adults care as much about learning as the students do? Say the researchers: "The students' definitions of good teaching provide an excellent starting point for identifying just what those actions might look like." (p. 22)

- Kate O'Neill