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Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want: Student Preferences about Literacy and Learning

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Think of something different. Don't just stand up there and just drag on all the time and ask, you know, "What's going on here?" I mean, somehow spice it up!
--Sondra

Faded images of the Spice Girls come to mind as I talk with Sondra. I imagine teachers dressed in babydoll or athletic clothing, licking lollypops or turning handsprings in order to capture the attention of students. I shake my head in disbelief. Sondra continues, "I just get tired, you know, of the same old, same old thing. In every class, we read the story, talk about the story, answer questions about it in groups, and take a test on it. I mean, how dull is that?"

We can learn a lot from our students. As teachers we often complain about incomplete homework, tortuous discussions, halfhearted reading, and careless writing. The topic of lunchtime conversations in the faculty lounge becomes those students who just don't try hard enough. As my colleagues and I struggle for answers, exchanging and sharing what we believe are more effective and inspirational literacy practices, I notice that nowhere are students involved in this dialogue. They eat in a separate cafeteria. It seems that we teachers are the ones who are doing most of the talking for and about them.

Students like Sondra have a great deal to teach us about effective and ineffective learning experiences in the language arts classroom. They are, as Alvermann, et al., remind us, experts on the topic of their own experiences. Yet few educational policymakers or stakeholders place student experiences with schooling at the center of their explorations. Part of the reason for this lack of student presence may be that few researchers have placed students' perceptions and experiences at the center of their attention (Erickson and Schultz). Researchers have sought opinions about their best teachers (McCabe; McDowell and McDowell). Attitudes about certain subjects and types of or contexts for instruction have also been examined (Fouts and Meyers; Maroufi; Oldfather; Shug, Todd, and Beery). Two studies provide a broader focus on student experiences (Taylor and Roselli; Wasserman). But clearly, there is a lot more to discover about students' ideas about literacy learning.

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Three years ago I began the slow process of gathering information about students' perceptions of effective and ineffective language and literacy instruction. In brief, my research protocol involved interviews and surveys. I used the critical incidents technique, a qualitative data gathering tool that asks informants to "tell the story" of two incidents, one the best example of the construct under study and the other the worst example (Patton). The interview/survey questions asked students to describe fully their best and worst literacy learning experiences. I simply defined *best* as "I enjoyed myself and I really learned a lot" and *worst* as its

opposite. I also asked students to articulate desired changes in schools or schooling, requesting that they refrain from impossible demands like two-hour lunch breaks, even though we might all enjoy these. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. In all, 75 students of varying academic abilities in grades 8-12 shared their experiences over a two-year period.

My analysis scheme was inductive. Using the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss), I looked for domains and categories across student experiences. Participation with a local collaborative research team (Kasten, Kinner, McKeon, Newton, Padak, Peck, Styslinger, and Wuthrick; Kasten, Kinner, McKeon, Newton, Padak, Peck, and Styslinger) allowed for the opportunity to cross-check findings with those of other teachers. The discussion shared below focuses on common elements garnered from the student stories.

The Best

Overwhelmingly, students categorize those experiences in the language arts classroom as "best" which allow for creative self-expression. Be it dramatic, artistic, or musical, the young men and women interviewed and surveyed want opportunities to further explore the fine arts during literacy learning. Students list speeches, skits, plays, commercials, debates, and even "teaching the class" as favorite activities. Artistic projects remain in their memories as they tell of making books and taking pictures: "You get a camera, and you go take all the pictures and then he [the teacher] says, 'make a project out of it.' You have to use so many pictures and it has to relate to whatever you're doing. Like, if you're reading a book, it has to relate to the theme of the book or some idea in it, or you just have freedom to express whatever it is, you know?" Students fondly recall illustrating scenes and producing videos in response to reading. Also falling into this realm of the desired creative response are those practices relating to musical expression. In the ninth grade, one student had to locate and write about a song he thought explained a part of his life. Sean thinks that was "way cool."

More specifically related to the reading process, these students poignantly recall those "best" experiences as those which allowed them opportunities for escape: "The best thing about reading is escaping from your life. It takes your mind off things and makes you feel better to hear that everybody else's life is just as messed up as yours." Johana agrees: "When you are reading, you can put yourself in another world. You can become that person in the book and do the things that person does. Reading helps me escape from the world I'm in and takes me to a totally different place." Empathy is a byproduct: "A book just makes you think about certain people and life situations." These young men and women astutely describe the "movie-in-the-mind" quality reading offers: "When a story really takes you places and puts you in the story itself, it's lots like a little TV in your mind."

In order for this mental flight and emotional understanding to occur, students want us to allow them to make more personal choices. They want to read what they want to read at a pace that is comfortable for them. Tanya, for example, tells passionately of a single opportunity to select a book that related to her experience, admitting, "I had a brother that committed suicide and it [*The Pact: A Love Story*] was about a suicide and it was about human relations, so I really, it was like you could understand it about a girl and a boy who grew up together." They request independence in their reading lives: "Just give us a block of time and let us read."

Similar to the reasons why these students enjoy reading are those why they enjoy writing: "The thing that I like best about writing is my stress outlet. I have a book that I write in when I'm really upset. If you were to read it, you'd swear I was suicidal. Writing is a way for me to vent all my anger and frustration in a healthy, constructive way." The responses of Tiara, Sean, Obad, and Carlos are similar in theme. These students desire more opportunities for personal writing, moments to "write about things that are important in my life," chances to "write about things I wish would happen in my life." Opportunity for escape is reiterated as Susan admits to enjoying writing "because it takes me to a

different world that I create." In this way, they can "learn stuff" about themselves. Again, these students ask teachers for more flexibility in assignments. "Please, let us write a short story on anything," Beth pleads. They don't want an assigned topic. The need for creative expression is a common theme among the stories told about best writing experiences.

The Worst

It is obvious that these students enjoy those activities which allow for independent expression. Sara likes opportunities to "talk about what your opinions are, like your opinions actually matter in the class." Ed enjoys the "circle thing" where he is provided the opportunity to voice his own opinions about a book or story. And interestingly, students also share their appreciation for the research process, as long as it allows the opportunity to explore what interests them.

Not surprisingly, these students are tired of ineffectively managed collaborative assignments. They complain of teachers who haphazardly assign groups, leaving them "stuck with others who won't do anything." These young men and women think it unfair to "put a group of students together and expect all of them to turn in one report, and them grade them all on the same scale." Many students tell of having to teach some "obnoxious boy [or girl] who slept in class and didn't listen." "Seldom am I paired with people who want to work and who care about their grade," Sara, an *A* student, confesses.

While they may not expect us to turn handsprings, these young men and women want less lecture in the classroom. "Just having the teacher sit and explain things piece by piece every day gets boring. I really don't like it when a teacher gets up and preaches at you." Brad insightfully describes how some teachers talk too much about who the author is and when he died. "The authors want to be known by what they wrote, not by where they lived and when they died," he rightly concludes. These students would like more current reading selections: "Everything you read is old." Brittney suggests that teachers "get something more modern, something people might care about because they're going to be more interested and more in tune to learning and reading and even writing about it and everything." They hate textbooks, prefer novels, and admit that the worst reading experiences are those in which they have no personal choices (as compared to the best reading experiences when they do have choices).

The worst writing assignments recalled are those that permit little flexibility: "Boundaries are everywhere." Topics are assigned. These young men and women are tired of writing in journals and memorizing roots and stems. "Busywork," they moan. They agree that you need to know what a noun is, what a verb is, but argue that "there's got to be a better way than just passing out a worksheet and saying, 'find the verb; find the noun.' "

Reflection

So what have I learned from Sondra, Sean, Johana, Tonya, Tiara, Obad, Carlos, Susan, Beth, Sara, Ed, Brittney, and the sixty-four other students I had the pleasure of chatting with? Talking with these students has reaffirmed my own beliefs in what constitutes good language and literacy teaching practice. Our students need opportunities for personal and creative expression during the reading and writing processes. We must better nurture the aesthetic response, broadening our conceptualizations of literacy to include more of the communicative and visual arts. As Flood and Lapp suggest, we should embrace a definition that encompasses "reading, writing, speaking, and listening to viewing and producing various modes of visual displays including dance, art, drama, computer technology, video, movies, and television" (343).

Students need chances to read and write about that which they feel passionately, selecting personal topics and conducting independent inquiry. They should be encouraged and guided in making their own decisions about reading and writing assignments. We must provide those experiences that allow for self-exploration and discovery, nurturing the processes of becoming within our students. Our guidance is needed, and we should do

our best to create those thoughtful moments in classrooms that allow young men and women to escape into and onto the page. We need to offer opportunities both for reflective independent and supervised collaborative work, carefully moderating the amount of our own talk. Journal writing, grammar assignments, and vocabulary study should be related to authentic reading and writing experiences. Above all else, I have determined from listening to these seventy-five voices that our students are astute and articulate. They want only to be more engaged in the processes of language and literacy learning. While I may not turn handsprings, I can offer them what they really, really want.

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