

# Student Voice and the Common Core

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*Replacing a discrete, sometimes lengthy list of topics to learn, the Common Core asks teachers to help students develop high-level cognitive skills: to persist, model, critique, reason, argue, explain, justify, and synthesize. Faced with this challenge, teachers are wondering what they can do to help students to meet the new standards and prepare for 21st-century careers. Research on student voice can provide some answers and inform the conversation about Common Core implementation. Over the past two decades, researchers, students, and educators have teamed up across a variety of projects and places to provide us with what kids say they need to engage deeply in their studies. Interestingly, what students have long told us they want in classroom curriculum and pedagogy resonates with Common Core principles. As educators work to implement the Common Core, student voice can offer useful guidance as well as concrete examples of the schoolwork students find most challenging, engaging, relevant, and educational.*

The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers.

—Common Core State Standards Initiative  
mission statement

If the reforms of the past 30 years have taught us nothing else, we know by now that theorizing about reform is far easier than enacting it. The visions of researchers, policy makers, and administrators rarely have reflected what has happened inside classrooms, which, even after reforms were adopted, often look indistinguishable from classrooms of decades earlier. Yet today, we face a significant shift in American education: In 2010, the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers released the Common Core, national curricular and pedagogical K–12 educational standards in mathematics and English language arts (ELA). Although national standards have been around for decades, the Common

Core represents work by powerful educational brokers who managed to get the Core adopted in 45 states and 3 territories, replacing or adapting an array of individual state standards, most of which were considered less rigorous and less specific. The new content standards and planned state assessments emphasize critical thinking, skill development, and application over more traditional measures of content knowledge and basic skills. At the time this chapter was written, K–12 teachers across the country were adopting new curricula and preparing to field test common student-level assessments developed by multistate consortia—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) or the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)—and setting performance standards in math and ELA. Since that time, controversy has bubbled up about the Common Core, and some states, including New York, have since delayed implementation.

By the time this chapter is published, we will have in hand the first year of student-level data on how American kids do on the new Common Core-aligned assessments. Meanwhile, funding has been flowing from state departments to districts to provide the technological infrastructure necessary to administer these new assessments and to provide teachers with the professional development needed to prepare to teach the new content and enact the new pedagogical practices that the Common Core and, later, the Next Generation Science Standards (e.g., NGSS has been adopted by 26 lead partner states thus far) will demand.

Business leaders, politicians, researchers, parent groups, and policy makers have all had a say in shaping the Common Core development and enactment, yet K–12 students have rarely been asked what they might think of this sea change in their midst. Although it may be too early to tell whether students feel the effects of this policy change or to gauge how they evaluate it, we can examine how the move to Common Core and NGSS fits with what students have said they want and need from their teachers. In this chapter, I consider what lessons educators might learn from students' past insights into curriculum and pedagogy as they set about implementing what many see as the most significant instructional reform of the past half-century. After all, the Common Core has been designed to stimulate significant shifts in both curricular content and instructional practice and, through these mechanisms, student learning.

Over the past several decades, educators and researchers who work on capturing students' opinions on their education needs and concerns have gathered data on curricular and pedagogical practices that work well for all types of learners (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding, 2004; Fine, Roberts, Torre, & Bloom, 2004; Jones & Yonezawa, 2002; Levin, 2000; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996). This body

of work contributes in important ways to current discussions on Common Core implementation by serving as a resource of examples of work that students see as meaningful and rigorous.

In this chapter, I share representative data gleaned from over 200 hours of student focus, student inquiry and student co-researcher groups. In these groups, students shared insights on the kinds of classroom work that might represent the best hope for Common Core implementation because the words they use to describe the work are synchronous with those applied to Common Core standards: relevant to the real world, connected to skills and knowledge they will need in college or in their careers, intellectually demanding, and engaging. In what follows, I refer to these four features of instructional practice as “Core-like” as I explain how students’ accounts of effective educational experiences align with the visions of those who have designed and pushed for the Common Core.

## METHODS

For the past 10 years, I, along with my colleague Makeba Jones at the University of California San Diego, ran numerous student focus groups, student inquiry groups, and student co-researcher (SCR) teams to examine educational practices at schools (Jones & Yonezawa, 2008b; Yonezawa & Jones, 2007). At the heart of this work was the goal of improving classroom instruction by identifying classroom practices that made students feel engaged and successful in school and that helped them learn and retain information over time. At the time, we didn’t think of ourselves as doing work on Common Core per se; rather, we were looking for the essence of classrooms—moments and experiences when schools really worked for student learning—so the kids could help describe these moments to influential adults who could then shape what happened at a school level.

In many respects, we were quite naïve. Students could name these moments; they could collect data on them; they could present their data compellingly. We quickly realized, however, that changing practices required so much more: commitment and understanding from administrators and teachers, resources (sometimes more and sometimes reallocated), and policy changes at the classroom, school, and district levels, just to name a few. We identified numerous powerful moments of learning, but frustratingly little changed in the end. Now, with the Common Core, the hard work of compelling educators to seek out such changes has been done. The challenge facing us now is helping educators charged with the task of implementing the Common Core to recognize and be better prepared to create Core-like classroom experiences for students.

## THE KIND OF WORK THAT STUDENTS WANT: CURRICULAR CONTENT

The authors of the Common Core Report noted, “We are the only leading industrialized nation that considers the mastery of basic skills to be the goal of K–12 education” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p.vi). This claim is particularly troubling given that basic skills education has long been seen as a motivation killer and that motivation is a key factor in getting young people to be active members of the classroom and achieve at high levels (Marks, 2000; Newmann, 1992; Newmann & Wehlage, 1993; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Proponents of the Common Core urge the system toward new descriptors of American education as “comprehensive” or “content-rich,” as well as toward more high-level skill-based learning and less drill-and-kill-based tactics. These higher order thinking skills include navigating new challenges and inferring, deducing, synthesizing, applying, and imagining new solutions (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011).

Even though many teachers and administrators worry that they have few ideas about how to teach toward the content-rich, skill-based standards of the Core, living examples of Core-like work exist within their high schools already. As one district administrator recently noted at a parent meeting, the Common Core is not so much novel as it is “the best of our teaching, the work we have always been the proudest of.”

Students would agree. Across the board, we have found from the hundreds of students with whom we have worked that students, when asked, could often readily identify a few examples, in each of their schools and across departments, that met Core-like criteria of relevant content designed to promote college and career readiness. This kind of road-mapping by students could prove extremely helpful as educators in a school or district try to figure out where examples of Core-like work that resonate with students already exist.

### REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES

When we asked students to describe for us times when they “showed what they know,” we were often regaled with stories about classrooms that sounded quite Core-like. At one school, student inquiry groups we spoke with described a 10th-grade geometry course in which they worked in groups to figure out the necessary angles of a driveway grade, given particular material properties. In a curricular unit created by their mathematics teacher, who wanted to give them an authentic task in which they could apply their burgeoning knowledge of slope, the students not only had to calculate the angle of the driveway but also present scale model drawings of their proposed driveway in teams to their mathematics teacher and the class.

At another high school we worked with, students in a co-researcher group

described interviewing and synthesizing first-person accounts of the Vietnam War in social studies class as a way to understand the impact of this historical event on people's everyday lives. Interviewing veterans who came into their classrooms and juxtaposing these interviews with readings they were doing as part of their coursework engaged the students as they dove deeply into non-fiction, accounts, both oral and written. Synthesizing and writing about these accounts in their English language arts classes, students told us, compelled them to come to their own conclusions about first-person war accounts. Students appreciated lessons about the past that had bearing on the present day. As Jessica, a senior at one high school we studied, explained:

I love my classes, all my classes, even the ones I find difficult. I don't find myself bored. Like in history, we won't be talking about what happened in history but how it applies to the current situation, how ideas and thoughts back then manipulated how our world is today.

The connections Jessica's teacher helped her make between the past and current events made her history class content feel more meaningful and relevant. In encouraging teachers to include "real-world examples" in their teaching, the Common Core builds on what students themselves have told us they find meaningful.

Students and educators agree that linking high-level curricular materials to students' lives is a productive way to address the Common Core's goals. For example, in her book *With Rigor For All: Meeting Common Core Standards for English Literature*, Carol Jago (2012) argued that replacing the examination of high-level literature texts (e.g. "the canon") with study of informational text genres has placed us at risk of ensuring that only some students (those from affluent backgrounds) receive access to rich literature. The problem with this inequity, Jago argues, is that the rich literature, when taught well, can help students make sense of their lives and the world around them. Instead of removing key literary pieces, Jago argued, we should embrace teaching practices that help students connect their life experiences to the literature they read and discuss. Students I have spoken with agree. The best kinds of classes, students say, are those that don't talk "down" to them but rather push them to connect high-level thinking to their lives. Sara, one student we worked with who attended an urban, majority-minority International Baccalaureate (IB) school, made this point:

I like how the teachers don't really talk down to the students; we are treated as all equals and we have intelligent discussions. There will be times when the teacher facilitates the discussion, of course. But, for the most part, we kind of sit around and talk about what we are learning and how we can apply it to our lives—and that is what makes it interesting.

## CONNECTED TO CAREER AND COLLEGE TRAJECTORIES

Core-like work does not just happen in accelerated, honors, AP, and IB tracks—whether they involve the “canon” or not. Indeed, in the student groups we worked with over the years, we found many examples of students who could also readily identify and describe Core-like work when it was attached to activities that helped them explore a future college or career interest. From the students we spoke with, we learned over time that many Core-like activities occurred in their regional occupation programs (ROPs) or other career pathway courses—those courses that some have historically equated with a lower track vocational education.

Many students described in detail the assignments and assessments required of them in courses such as marketing and hospitality, virtual enterprise, culinary arts, fire protection, or even ROTC. These courses, students explained, often asked them to “apply” components that challenged them to engage in Core-like practices such as modeling, persisting, and justifying their work and perspective.

For instance, in one study we ran, entitled *Pathways to Postsecondary Success*, Julia, a senior, described her culinary arts class to us in a way that illustrated the challenges and high engagement of the course assignment. As part of her coursework for this class, Julia had to work in a team with her classmates to design a new restaurant from the ground up, which they then submitted to a regional competition for new restaurant ideas.

So pretty much the competition is like you design a restaurant concept and you try to sell it to the investors, which are the judges. You make it seem why yours is . . . why they should invest in it. . . . I had to work with four people, and we designed a whole restaurant. It was called Vida . . . I came up with the name. . . . It was hard at first. We were all four different people who did not agree at all. I had more . . . like a modern thing, I . . . and I love seafood, so I was kind of more like this. Another person was from Louisiana, so she wanted more like a cowboy theme. Another person she wanted a really high-end [restaurant] like only rich people would have and stuff. But they gave you demographics of what you have to have in your theme, a certain age or what it is surrounded by. The demographics matched the San Diego downtown area, so we kind of based our stuff in the San Diego area. We just went on with it, and we went to competition on April 1st and 2nd. . . . It was cool. We won second place.

Julia’s excitement over the culinary arts and hospitality course she enrolled in came from her opportunity to work alongside her classmates

to synthesize and apply the her learning in the course toward a comprehensive, team-oriented, and authentically assessed project. In this project, Julia and her team of fellow students had to meet several Core requirements, including, but not limited to, the 11th-12th-grade California ELA standards of Comprehension and Collaboration and Presentation of Ideas. Students like Julia, and the stories she told about her course, were common among the high school students we have spoken with in the past.

#### THE KIND OF TEACHING STUDENTS WANT: PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

The Common Core aims to change not just *what* teachers teach students but also *how* they teach. In other words, the Common Core State Standards intend to affect both curriculum and pedagogy. Our research has found that students could just as quickly identify instructional practices and authentic tasks that they believed to be highly educational as they could meaningful curricular content. We found that their accounts of effective practice all shared two key features: rigor and engagement.

#### RIGOROUS TEACHING

In the past, I engaged in work to develop student co-researcher teams (with my colleague Makeba Jones) across several regional high schools. By definition, a student co-researcher team is a group of volunteer students (sometimes recruited from a course and sometimes convened in an after-school space) who come together as a social science research team with guidance from university researchers to identify and study a research question relevant to their local school-community context. Methods are driven by the question proposed. Regular, often weekly, work is done jointly by the students and researchers to complete the study.

In 2009, six freshmen at International Studies High School (ISHS) developed and researched answers to a single question: *Why are our classes challenging but not interesting?* This student team interviewed 27 fellow students and 8 teachers over a semester and gathered survey responses to help answer their question from all the school's 500 students. They analyzed the data and presented their findings to the teachers and administration.

Fundamentally, the work of these students helped highlight what Common Core work is *not*. That is, they focused on how ISHS classrooms defined challenging work often as quantity rather than quality—whereas the students would have preferred a “less but deeper” approach. Often students complained of inordinate amounts of homework that lacked a meaningful purpose or objective. By systematically gathering data from fellow students, the ISHS student co-researcher team showed their teachers and principal that the rigor of overloaded assignments was increasing

the difficulty of the class but hindering deeper student engagement and learning. The co-researcher team highlighted interviews with students who talked about choosing strategically between learning versus doing the work to save their grades and sometimes their sanity. The following quotes from students illustrate this point:

Student 1: It was really hard. Right now we're studying about bio-chemistry. You have to memorize all the 10 function groups, and I don't understand all the 10 groups. It's not the teaching; it's the amount of the information. It's confusing to me.

Echoing this high school student, Common Core advocates have argued that rigor equates to the pursuit of conceptual understanding and application for students rather than a curriculum that focuses on memorization and procedures. For this student, it was not necessarily the teacher's pedagogical approach that was inherently the problem; it was the fact that he was being asked to memorize the function groups without understanding what they were in the first place. Another student chimed in by saying that the "challenging" courses, he found, were the ones where the homework came in droves:

Student 2: The most challenging classes I think I have are the ones that give me the most homework . . . geometry, Spanish, biology, and English. Just takes my time.

Student 3: Some classes are challenging, mainly due to the homework.

Student 4: Some of them [teachers] have a lot of quizzes, reading, and homework. And there are things I don't really understand.

Student 5: They are challenging in that a lot of them require a lot of physical work.

When students described classrooms that "just take my time" or that involved "physical work," they often meant that they were frequently up late studying, hauling around textbooks from class to class, and filling out reams of paper in response to study guides or worksheets to prepare for tests and quizzes they would soon be asked to take. Although sometimes students "learned" through these practices, sometimes they did the work without developing a depth of understanding of the content itself. More often, students said, this type of "physical work" often left them tired and hungry for more thoughtful, conceptual work. Whether they defined challenge as the quantity of the work asked of them or the quantity of the information they were asked to remember, students found their courses particularly difficult but in precisely non-Core-like ways.



What the student co-researcher team discovered about rigor and then systematically shared back with the adults at their site caused the ISHS teachers to ask themselves: Is everything we are assigning essential to the students' learning? Is there a point of diminishing returns? And could we design smarter, not necessarily just more time intensive, assignments?

Consistent with the recommendations from the students, the Common Core standards are intended to reduce the quantity of work while increasing the level of rigor for all students. Academic rigor within the Common Core has been described as work that requires students to synthesize, apply, and justify. High school youth, if we ask them, will tell us where that type of depth of challenge is happening, although challenging usually still means going through greater quantities of assignments, shallow and fast, like frantically splashing your way through ankle-deep water. Brunner (2013) made a similar point in an article published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals:

Business leaders, parents, and the authors of the Common Core are not the only ones who recognize the need for college and career readiness; students want to be prepared too. They do not want to sit in classrooms where rigor is minimal, engagement is limited, and nothing of substance is discussed or learned. They have a vested interest in the rigor associated with secondary education. (p. 25)

## ENGAGING TEACHING

Scholars debate appropriate ways to define and measure educational engagement—cognitive, behavioral, and emotional (Newmann, 1992; Newmann & Wehlage, 1993). Whereas behavioral engagement is the easiest to observe, increasing cognitive and emotional engagement of students in rigorous academic tasks may produce the biggest academic payoff (Yonezawa, Jones, & Joselowsky, 2009). Parallel research on expanded time to learn has shown that although more time can lead to higher performance (Traphagen & Zorich, 2013), more *engaged time* leads to the biggest learning gains—and without adding to schools' and districts' bottom lines.

The work we have done with high school students suggests that student engagement comes not only from extrinsic motivation, such as jobs and salaries, but also from students investing themselves in their learning and in the mastery of ideas, not just memorizing information. When students engage—behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally—they learn new information, content knowledge, and skills, and they tend to do so when they are asked not just to absorb but also to produce new knowledge. Even better is when

that new knowledge production helps students see themselves in a new light. When that new identity is connected to what they could become occupationally, something really special occurs. Students tell us that they seek “sweet water”—the meaning underneath the ideas that they study—and they tell us that they are willing to dig deeply to get there. Most important, they appreciate being asked to connect their learning and work to larger audiences that go beyond a teacher, a test, a grade, a college application, or a diploma. Engaged students, like all of us, want their work to have meaning and purpose in the larger community (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012)—they just want that “meaningful work” to start earlier in their educational careers.

The students we worked with over the years often pointed us to engaging lessons that mirror Common Core standards and assessments. In the Common Core Report entitled *Why We’re Behind: What Top Nations Teach Their Students but We Don’t* (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2009), the authors argued that while other nations like Finland, Japan, Switzerland, and South Korea cover the same core subjects as the United States, it is the way in which they engage students in the raw curriculum that makes the difference in student outcomes. The authors provide some of the following examples:

- Fourth graders in Hong Kong visit an artist’s studio, study Picasso’s *Guernica*, and analyze the works of modernist sculptor Henry Moore.
- Seventh graders in South Korea are expected to know not just about supply and demand but also about equilibrium price theories, property rights, and generating new ways to improve market function.
- Eighth graders from the Canadian province of Ontario are expected to create musical compositions, conduct, and know musical terms in Italian.

These examples give us a sense of what the Common Core proponents are reaching for in terms of changes in American classroom practices.

The examples students have provided in focus groups, inquiry groups, and student co-researcher groups have also drawn attention to project-based learning and interactive learning as particularly engaging pedagogical approaches. For example, students spoke with enthusiasm about the hands-on science class where students measured environmental hazards in their local community and made presentations to local stakeholders. These students argued for the Common Core without naming it as such and shared insights as to why such experiences resonated with them. Students spoke pointedly about the need for both authentic work and interactive lessons. For example, Mark, a 10th-grade student, explained,

I want my classes to be interactive, visual learning. I want to use my hands, instead of just sitting in class listening to the teacher lecture. I want to be involved. I hate history, but I love my class this year, because it's interactive. As long as it's interesting and I'm involved, instead of just sitting there [with the teacher] lecturing all day and taking notes. That's when I almost fall asleep.

Engaging classes are those in which the students assumed active roles as creators and communicators of knowledge rather than as passive receptacles receiving teacher-generated content.

The kinds of educational experiences we construct for students via the Common Core reforms will make or break the opportunities kids have to be highly motivated and engaged and thus learn at a high level. Guthrie, Wigfield, and Klauda (2012), for example, argued that classrooms that embed key motivators such as academic choice, collaboration, and authentic tasks that offer challenging but appropriately scaffolded or “warm” tasks and that ask kids to tackle problems that they themselves appreciate as meaningful enable students to become the active learners we are hoping they can be.

#### A CAUTION FROM STUDENTS (AND RESEARCHERS)

Today's generation of high school students grew up in an educational system in which state standards and accountability systems are the norm. They use the term *standards*, have heard their principals lecture about the need to raise test scores, and have seen their teachers struggle to implement district or state standards in creative, engaging ways. Osel, an ISHS junior, raised the impact that standards have had on his high school experience:

I think if my teachers would not have gone as much with the standards because a lot of the teachers strictly follow the standards, and I think it gets to the point where it's completely boring and completely detracts from the purpose which is for us [to be] learning and being enriched.

When asked, however, what they would like American high school education to become, these very same students—who have known no other system—called for a much more individualized and flexible high school experience. Take Tyler's comment, for instance:

I would want my classes improved by giving a little more unique education, what I mean by that, catering to the individual not making everyone take the same tests and take the same classes. I think if they did a little more catering to everyone's individual needs and interests I think it would be much more rewarding and interesting for the student.

At first glance, this comment runs counter in many ways to the very notion of the Common Core. But it does not have to be.

The challenge for educators as they embrace the new Common Core standards is figuring out how to actually do what the proponents of the Core standards envisioned within classrooms: how to produce an integrated, creative, rigorous, and individualized approach to meeting all the standards as laid out in each subject area. Indeed, the Common Core document is highly encouraging of project-based learning that incorporates multiple standards with more in-depth pieces of work by students. This approach may be far more palatable to students who told the ISHS team and me over and over again how more “projects,” “hands-on,” “group work,” “partner work,” “creative activities,” “interactive activities,” and lessons with “more spunk” in general would greatly improve their educational experience.

Let me be clear that the students were not necessarily saying that there is no place in their classrooms for knowing their multiplication tables or the parts of a cell. They understood that some of their lives as students would require them to memorize facts and procedures and that knowing these facts and procedures would actually serve them well in the long run, whether for college or career. They just hungered for something more.

Educational researchers and policy makers may long continue to debate the value of the new Common Core standards. We, as adults, will vociferously debate whether the standards have the appropriate balance of higher order versus lower order thinking skills (Porter et al., 2011); whether they are a cover for national accountability schemes to undermine public education (Welner, 2014); and whether Common Core assessment bills are far too steep to pay at a statewide level, lining the pockets of testing regimes (Ravitch, 2014). Those are serious debates that we should have and are having as adults around Common Core.

In the meantime, though, let us remind ourselves that students have spoken for a long time about why work that encourages them to produce higher order thinking and collaborative, creative work can inspire them to strive. A decade of collective student voice data amassed over the years has shown me many examples of how students can recognize when Core-like experiences have occurred in their classroom. Indeed, when students talked in excited terms about these courses, teachers, and assignments, they expressed what I believe to be at the heart of the Common Core document: relevance and rigor. Students whom I have interviewed and talked with in focus groups and who have stood by me and my colleagues while studying their own schools have repeatedly been able to describe the courses—some mathematics and English but some in other “non-Core” areas too—that allow them to understand and apply their learning in authentic ways that they found far more engaging and fulfilling. They could

talk about these learning experiences with such ease because these are the very instructors and classes that stick in their heads, long after the school bells stop ringing and the buses cease rolling, and all while adults around them continue to debate how and why to improve American schooling.

## CONCLUSION

What does the Common Core ask for, and what do students say they want? Both the Common Core and the students we interviewed call for our educational system to provide students with the opportunity to engage in high-level content through meaningful integrated activities. Both ask for more hands-on, applied work—projects not for projects' sake but to give students multiple opportunities to show what they know. Both the Common Core and the students with whom we spoke want real-world application of in-class work. Both the Common Core and students seek work that builds from students' life experiences; both press on educators to assign and to support work that will help prepare students in purposeful ways for their futures in college and/or career. Neither students nor Common Core proponents want to see challenge pursued as it has been: with a pile-it-on mentality that buries students in classwork and homework—in pursuit of higher and higher test scores—and with little engagement, applicability, or relevance to their lives or the world around them.

Student voice research has pointed out time and again the value of listening to youth regarding various school reform initiatives (Fielding, 2001a, 2001b; Levin, 2000; Jones & Yonezawa, 2008a, 2008b; Mitra, 2001, 2004, 2007; Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck et al., 1996; Yonezawa & Jones 2007, 2009). As we continue down the path of the Common Core implementation, educators and policy makers need to pay greater attention to youth voices that can provide a wealth of insights to those whose charge that it is to implement the Common Core over the next decade. Currently, many educators and classrooms in the United States already embrace “Core-like” practices. We may not know exactly which classrooms these are, but the students do. We just need to ask them. Questions such as the following may prove most generative: When have you applied what you have learned to real-world examples? When have you done classroom work that relates directly to a career of interest? What does challenging work really look like? What really engages you in learning? Over the years, I have found that when administrators and educators learn to listen to the answers students provide to these questions and then act on them, the result is a rich and meaningful educational experience that provides young people with the critical foundation they need to become successful lifelong learners and members of society.

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SUSAN YONEZAWA has straddled the worlds of policy, practice, and research on urban schooling for 17 years. The associate director of UC San Diego's CREATE—a unique action-oriented research center—Yonezawa studies ways to increase college access and preparation for underrepresented, low-income youth. Her work on equity-minded educational policies, personalization, and student voice includes over 15 book chapters, 13 journal articles, and 23 technical reports. Most recently, she helps lead a collective impact effort to link UCSD STEM faculty, staff, and students to teachers and underrepresented students specifically to address the K-20 STEM pipeline. See <http://create.ucsd.edu> (STEM Initiative) for more information.

## A STUDENT'S TAKE ON TRACKING

CAROLYN ECKSTEIN

It was a grim Wednesday morning at school, with more than the usual number of student groans and complaints, including from me. Slumping into a hard plastic chair, I opened my notebook and received an unanticipated paper-cut. The day was going downhill, and it wasn't even 9:00. How would I last six more hours? Fortunately, my regular class is no ordinary one, and my day made a swift turnaround. Let me explain.

This year, in eighth grade, I was selected by lottery to participate in an integrated program offered by my middle school in Radnor, PA. The program is called "Soundings." Soundings is a democratic classroom in which there is no set curriculum. Rather, the students decide the curriculum as a class, by reaching consensus on what they wish to study. Part of our Soundings day always included at least one class discussion. On most days, our discussions were guided by student-chosen quotes. On other days, the discussions focused on a teacher-chosen question, often pertaining to our current unit of self-selected study.

On this particular dismal morning, we were going to share and discuss our collective responses to Eleanor Roosevelt's quote, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." A plethora of fascinating responses were offered by various members of the class. As the discussion progressed, we hit on the idea of self-esteem, which I found very intriguing. We concluded that humans are constantly comparing themselves to others, sometimes even subconsciously. This, in turn, catalyzed a spin-off discussion about class leveling and tracking. It was an animated discussion made possible because the Soundings students came from all different "tracks." My brain was finally awake.

From a young age, students in my district are constantly and continuously being analyzed for their ability to succeed. Those children who show aptitude and academic prowess in the lower grades are rewarded with a "higher level" of education, only expanding the gap between those "gifted" students and their "average" peers. In kindergarten, many of us took an odd sort of test. Although we did not know it at the time, it was an IQ test. It seems we were handpicked by our teachers to possibly participate in a gifted program, even though none of us could read yet. Out of the thirty children who took the test in kindergarten, only three students, including me, scored high enough to enter the gifted program. This program consisted of being "pulled out" from our regular class to work on "advanced" projects. I wasn't sure what was going on, but it made me feel superior to be considered "special."



As I entered secondary school, being “gifted” changed. Instead of having every student in the grade learn the same curriculum, our standardized test results split us into two separate groups, “accelerated” and “grade-level.” The accelerated students received more information at a faster pace, while the grade-level students learned only what was required by the state. The chasm between the accelerated students and the average students now seemed wider. It seemed odd to me that scores on one test were so influential. We were also told that only those in the accelerated track would be able to take AP Calculus. I didn’t even know what that meant, but it sounded important.

I understand that a possible reason for class tracking is that all students learn at different rates. But what I did not understand was why I was considered “accelerated,” while my very smart best friend was only considered “average.” In retrospect, I learned the answer to that when I chose to study standardized testing in Soundings. It seems that standardized tests have become the kings and queens of public education: the autocratic dictators determining which kids go into which tracks or levels. Regardless of the merit of these tests, the fact is we are not going to spend our lives surrounded by people who learn in the same way as we do. No matter where we go, we’ll always be interacting with people who are *not* like us, people who have diverse educational skills and values. Class placements strictly determined by standardized tests compromise student growth. Instead of interacting with and learning from a diverse population, we end up with a bland and homogenous classroom experience. My experience has shown me that diverse settings, like in Soundings, may be the key to a more rewarding education.

After almost ten years of being tracked with people who got high standardized test scores like me, I was immersed in a far more heterogeneous environment through Soundings. You don’t need high test scores to be in Soundings, just an interest in self-directed learning. I can honestly say that the eclectic students in Soundings brought with them a wealth of great ideas, some of which may never have been addressed in a “gifted” class setting. For instance, my “average” friend and I worked together on a project about correctional facilities and how functional they really were. We were not only able to facilitate our own discussion about the treatment and rehabilitation of prisoners, as well as the death penalty, but also take it a step further and design our own “perfect” prison. Although it was sometimes frustrating to work with people who had trouble with things that came easily to me, like spelling, I learned that anyone could have interesting ideas, whether they are “gifted” or not. Some of my Soundings classmates might have had low standardized test scores, but they sure were smart.

CAROLYN ECKSTEIN is a ninth-grade student at a suburban Philadelphia high school. Her current academic passion is understanding and challenging public policies that perpetuate social stereotypes. In addition to playing alto saxophone in her school's jazz band, she enjoys soccer, softball, karate, swimming, and skiing (fast).

## A STUDENT'S TAKE ON ACCESS TO PREPARED AND EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

SHAYLA JOHNSON

I am a senior at Overbrook High School in the Philadelphia School District. I write this as a member of the Philadelphia Student Union, which is a youth-led organization that young people like me join to improve their education. I am very concerned about the issues of teacher quality and effectiveness, both my teachers and teachers to come. My school, Overbrook, is a large school. We have around 1,200 students enrolled in it as of now. Overbrook is 99% African American. It is located in a rough neighborhood. Just coming and leaving school is a hardship for many students that attend my school because of the violence around us. Reading this, I bet it wouldn't surprise you that many of the students that attend my school don't graduate or even make it to college.

When I joined Philadelphia Student Union, I was in eighth grade. I was going to Catholic school so the hardships that I would hear from my peers didn't really affect me because I didn't have to live it on a day to day basis. In my eleventh-grade year, when I started going to Overbrook, a comprehensive neighborhood school, I immediately saw the transformation in teacher quality and effectiveness. Once entering Overbrook, I realized how important it was to educate the students on what we deserve, and explain to them that if we don't speak up and demand high-quality education and a key role in helping our school to better itself, nothing would change.

In the Philadelphia Student Union, teacher quality and equity and teacher distribution is one of the top issues impacting our members. We've learned from our research that there is a great inequality in students' access to qualified teachers and that the inequality is growing. Across our district, teachers with less than three years experience grew from 17% in 2008–2009 to 31.5% in 2009–2010. These inexperienced teachers are disproportionately placed in low-income, high-minority schools like mine. Not only that, but one third of the 800 new teachers hired in Philadelphia were interns from programs such as Teach for America and Philadelphia Teacher Fellows in which they were learning on the job.

However, I believe students like me deserve qualified and effective teachers. Society today is very hard and is very competitive. My goal in life is to become an obstetrician, but I am being set up for failure by not having qualified and effective teachers in the most important classes, like AP Calculus. If it's mandatory that I attend school, why isn't it mandatory that the school provide me with qualified teachers so I can learn? At my school last year, we had a lot of teachers leave our school and a lot of new teachers

come in. Often times, teachers are taking on new classes and roles that they are not even qualified to teach, like my librarian who was assigned to teach me SAT prep. If that's not hard enough, some teachers that teach at my school aren't even from my community and don't understand how to teach nor relate to us, like my drama teacher; she doesn't know how to deal with neighborhood kids. We rarely get anything done, and for one of our skit assignments, she told us that we could use up to only five cuss words in our scene. Why would she let us cuss in school? We are influencing her when she should be influencing us.

If new teachers are going to be assigned to my school, they need to be trained on how to handle students. I think that new teachers should be paired up with teachers who already know how to interact with the students and who are from our community. That would lessen the culture shock, and the students might be actually able to learn something. Teachers need training about the community and how to interact with students on a *positive* level. They need training on how to teach and on how to realize that the way they are teaching is ineffective and learn how to switch it up and make it better so students won't get left behind. They should get training before they start teaching.

Another consequence of unqualified, ineffective teachers is that it contributes to the school to prison pipeline, which is policies and practices that push students from the school house to the jailhouse. When teachers cannot manage classrooms because they are too inexperienced, they end up relying on suspension and expulsion for situations that other experienced teachers could have handled differently. When teachers are unqualified, students don't learn, and they become disengaged and begin to act up or just drop out, which most likely will lead to incarceration.

In conclusion, I don't think that it's fair that students in Philadelphia aren't getting equal access to qualified and effective teachers, and instead a lot of us are being taught by teachers who are still learning themselves. The federal law that allows teachers in training to be concentrated in my school and district isn't fair and is hurting my education. Education is a human right, and we all deserve an equal opportunity to learn. No one in Congress would want this for their own children, so why is this good enough for me? I believe that we need change.

SHAYLA JOHNSON graduated from Overbrook High School in Philadelphia. As a member of the Philadelphia Student Union, she was engaged in campaigns related to full and fair funding for education, school push-out and zero tolerance policies, and the equitable distribution of effective teachers. In 2011, she testified at a Senate briefing on Student Access to Prepared and Effective Teachers, chaired by Senator Bernie Sanders.