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# Foreword

## *The Importance of Students' Voices*

*Paula Kluth and Peyton Goddard*

In 2003, fifth graders from Room 405 at Richard E. Byrd Community Academy, a Chicago public school, decided they needed a new school. Byrd was located near Cabrini Green, a large housing project in Chicago, and most of the students at the school lived right in the neighborhood. Working with their teacher, Brian Schulz, the students decided they could and should create a better place to learn for themselves. Following is an excerpt from the mission statement they wrote at the outset of their journey:

*Our school building, Richard E. Byrd Community Academy, has so many problems we do not think it can be fixed. We created a web graphic organizer to put down all the ideas we had about what was wrong with our school. Here is a list of all the major problems about our school: the restrooms, office, windows, water fountains, classrooms, temperature, library, outside all need a lot of help. In addition our school does not even have a gym, lunchroom, or auditorium/stage. Based on all these problems we think we need a whole new school.*

*The issue of our building being messed up is a serious problem. Our school is not safe, comfortable, or a good place to learn because of all these things wrong with it. We think kids deserve to have a safe, comfortable, and nice place to learn. (Room 405 Website, 2005)*

The story is a bit astounding, not only because they took on this serious problem themselves but because they were so successful. The students wrote an 11-point action plan. It included photographing the school's problems, surveying the student body, and researching the construction funding plans for public schools. They also launched an aggressive letter and e-mail campaign targeting elected officials, journalists, and decision makers within the school system.

Though the district eventually closed Byrd and sent the students to a neighboring school instead of building a new one, the students did more than create a stir. They attracted reporters not only from local news outlets but from National Public Radio. They created their own documentary film. They had

visitors ranging from state politicians to Ralph Nader. They received over a hundred letters of support from professors, lawmakers, teachers, and citizens and even got one from the vice president of the United States.

This story is one of many in which student voices were valued, heard, and, in many ways, honored. It is powerful because it not only causes us to celebrate the potential of our youth but may help us see how children and teens can have a real impact on the world and change not only educational outcomes but the act of teaching itself.

Unfortunately, student voices have not always been at the center of teaching and learning in this country despite the many stories we have all heard about student creativity, leadership, and innovation. Many obstacles, of course, hold teachers back from empowering learners to take control of their educational experiences and from working collaboratively with students. One obstacle is certainly the norms and traditions of schooling itself. It is common to see students being taught but not common to see students co-teaching with their instructors, and it is even less common to see them teaching without the support of a teacher. It is common to see students working in groups but uncommon to see them forming groups and leading them. It is common to see students completing work assigned by teachers but uncommon to see students addressing real problems that they see in the world and developing solutions to them.

Another barrier has been teacher education. Few collaboration courses for preservice teachers feature students as a resource for problem solving, curriculum planning, or teaching. New teachers, therefore, may be coming out of their preparation programs without an understanding of all that is possible for the learners in their care. Even at the college level, students are seldom seen as problem solvers or creators of authentic products or solutions. I remember the reactions I received from my first class of preservice teachers when I asked them to create products not for me but for their community, their school, or themselves. Instead of asking them to take tests or compose essays, I asked them to write papers for possible publication, to create children's literature, to assemble a presentation for fellow teachers, to propose a program, or to craft a solution to a problem they saw in their school or community. Some were excited, but many others seemed initially stumped or confused by the invitation to create and think out of the box.

Finally, teachers may encounter the barrier of having few resources to support this work of creativity and collaboration. Thanks to Rich Villa, Jacque Thousand, and Ann Nevin and this fantastic resource you hold in your hands, however, this final barrier is getting easier and easier to traverse. This book will help all of those educators who have felt that they didn't have a resource with tips on how to create student collaboration or those who were unsure of the research behind this work. It will also help any teacher who feels alone. As you read this book, you will meet other educators who took risks, proposed solutions, navigated difficult questions, and found new excitement in their teaching by collaborating with their students.

To date, this is the most comprehensive guide to working alongside students in our diverse schools. In reading this very important text, even the most savvy and teaming-oriented teacher will gain new ideas for designing lessons, providing

instruction, meeting individual student needs, motivating learners, and creating safer and more peaceful schools. The primary reason, however, for celebrating this text is that it is the only one of its kind to consider the needs of and, of course, the voices of students who are the most marginalized in our schools. In addition to providing ideas relevant across ethnicity, race, region, and learning profiles, the book also features the stories of students with disabilities. The authors make it quite clear that we can “listen” to all student voices, even when the individuals of concern communicate in alternative ways, do not have the language or experience of having agency or creating change, or need support from others to express themselves.

Instead of attempting to expand on how important this work is, I will hand this part of the Foreword over to my colleague, Peyton Goddard, who has more than a few things to express about power, collaboration, and voice.

In 1977 at the age of three, a joy-filled girl named Peyton Goddard was segregated into special education. She spent the following two decades in restricted placements, where she lost her joy and gained multiple labels, including severely mentally retarded and autistic. Since she was nonverbal and unable to point dependably or replicate sign language, educators assumed she had nothing to say and, thus, denied her the support she required to learn and communicate in alternative ways. Living in despair, she saw a life she'd never want anyone to teach as being acceptable for any human being.

In 1997, after years of silent pleas, hope arrived in the form of augmentative alternative communication, and she gained a dependable way to communicate. The strategy she uses to communicate, called facilitated communication, involves a trained support person offering a combination of physical and emotional support so she can type with one finger on a keyboard. In 2002, she graduated valedictorian from Cuyamaca Community College with nearly a 4.0 average. Today, she is living near her parents in her own apartment with 24-hour support, and she is writing a memoir of her life.

Here in Peyton's own words are answers to three questions we asked of her.

**Why is it important for school personnel to listen to the voice of students in determining placement, instruction, accommodations, and support?**

*I'm wasted 22 years in no education. Puny, I wept, desiring death. Young, eased I was to news that I'm revered nothing, esteemed nothing. Treed like an animal, I was led tugged to red hot anger, to rest never. Red anger in devalued peoples, trees us all red in this warring, wasted-joy, worrisome world. Each destiny-errored, festered-sad, differently-wired but “cares to learn” child, needs assurance they are not weeds but fragrant flowers of vast points to be greeted as valuable. Support all voices in determining their destiny and these points of opportunity, I point out:*

1. Kids will not simmer or explode in anger, coping with pity of no one esteeming them.
2. Kids' wars over feeling no worth, will epitome end.
3. World will move in joy, not in wars.

**What can school personnel do to help students discover their voice?**

*There, in either the tested room or the class room, best tell each cherub that they can lead. Say that they are the guiders to test the best ways to heat their versed, vested, vastly valuable, vellum varied, esteemed equated equal, red news never viewed, volumed voices. Tease these cherubs never with fears you will try only one way to help them access speech. When they know their differences will be supported by you saying you will never stop trying ways to help them find their very best voice, their fears rest. There, they are not awed by pity. There, esteem is greeted. I'm in peace because someone saw all people are real and deserve being supported to communicate their truths.*

**In your K–12 experience, what has happened when your voice has been heard and also when it has NOT been heard?**

*I'm heard zero, I point out. I'm gyred up, I'm gyred down, whipped into sweared want death, my meal opted over. Queer modes of my actions festered. In wasp by eddy of never being in unity with creation, I was upped insane. There pouts melted me.*

*Now you greet me as a writer who is stretching your imaginings to pity me not, but to cope with kissing the news that "I'm real, ain't that a sweet saw surprise!" And I am possessed of voice, as you are too.*