

Research Guide



Meaningful

Student Involvement

Adam Fletcher

meaning

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is the process of engaging
students in every facet of the
educational process for the
purpose of strengthening their
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Presented by

www.soundout.org
promoting meaningful student involvement in school change

Meaningful Student Involvement: Research Guide
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The author warmly appreciates generous support provided by the HumanLinks Foundation. Special thanks go to Sue Paro for her commitment and contributions to this publication and the entire Meaningful Student Involvement series.

There were numerous involved in the creation of this document and the premise it supports. The author wishes to specifically thank the following for their contributions: Kari Kunst of The Freechild Project; Beth Kelly, Jessica Vavrus, Nasue Nishida, and Greg Williamson of the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction; Sasha Rabkin of the Institute for Community Leadership; Andrea Felix of Youth Service America; Wendy Lesko of the Youth Activism Project, and; Michael Vavrus of The Evergreen State College.

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Introduction

This publication reviews literature that broadly summarizes, examines, and assesses examples of Meaningful Student Involvement. Particular attention is paid to the roles of students in school change. Meaningful Student Involvement is the process of engaging the knowledge, experience and perspectives of students in every facet of the educational process for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy.

There are multiple approaches to changing the roles of young people in schools that can count as Meaningful Student Involvement. Generally speaking, Meaningful Student involvement occurs when schools engage students as teachers, education researchers, school planners, classroom evaluators, system-wide school decision-makers, and education advocates. Ultimately, and most importantly, Meaningful Student Involvement seeks to raise students above their own narrow conceptions of self-interest for the benefit of the schools and communities they are members of.

The articles, journals, and books reviewed come from both *scholarly* research that represents a scientific, theory-testing approach; and *applied* research that employs case studies resulting in theories. The goal of this research guide is to identify what literature exists and evaluate its value in advocating for Meaningful Student Involvement.

As the research shows, activities related to Meaningful Student Involvement are happening across the U.S. and around the world. In Bear Valley, California, high school students worked with professional researchers to design a program that would measure students' opinions and experiences in school. In Cheney, Washington, second grade students redesigned their classroom curriculum. Across the U.S., students in the Generation YES program lead workshops and programs that train teachers to use technology in their classrooms. In other countries, including England, Australia, and Norway, there are actually federal mandates that elicit student involvement in education decision-making. The stories continue, leaving irrefutable evidence that there is a growing movement for Meaningful Student Involvement.

In many ways, the research surrounding Meaningful Student Involvement represents a turning point for education improvement efforts. The tide is turning from the antiquated notion of students as passive recipients of teaching, to a new recognition of the interdependence that is necessary between students and adults. At the same

time, students and adults are raising the bar of expectations for what students can do. As the following research proves, students are seriously engaged in critical reflection about their schools, uniting with their peers and adults in collective action, and engaged with adult education leaders to seek uncommon and innovative strategies to chronic problems in schools. Schools can strengthen themselves by creating, learning from, replicating, and supporting Meaningful Student Involvement so that students can work with adults to determine how to make our schools better places to learn.



Listening to Students

Listening to students plays an important role in education reform, in that it provides a necessary foundation from which education leaders can develop informed opinions and take practical action for school change. These leaders face multiple pressures and are often faced with making decisions “on-the-spot.” By understanding what students think, experience, feel, and know, these types of decisions can be better informed.

There are a variety of limitations to simply listening to students, but not engaging them as partners in school change. As Cook-Sather (2002) sees the situation, students have an inherent lack of authority in their words. Whether spoken by a student or an adult, adults in schools have not been particularly interested in hearing students over the last 100 years of public schools. Students may also face a poverty of imagination: even when asked to participate, they may not know of the range of activities, or the extent of their ability and power.

Students often perceive adults as guardians of the keys to learning about learning, as if they were sacred relics. It can be rare for students to have the opportunity to know *why*, *how*, and *when* they need to learn something. Students cannot ask for something they do not know exists. There may be a problem of accountability: students are held accountable to many layers of adults in schools, including teachers, administrators, coaches, and others, not to mention home and community. Who is accountable to students? Once a student has offered their informed knowledge, their thoughtful ideas, and their insightful critiques of schools, who is obligated to actually listen to them? Who is accountable to actually *act* on what students say?

The literature presented in this guide provides a careful roadmap that details a growing movement for Meaningful Student Involvement. Renowned critical educator Paulo Freire (1998) challenged teachers to “speak by listening.” It can no longer be said that listening to students is a fanciful way to dress up school reform efforts. Educators cannot afford to ignore students, because students will tell educators what is actually working in their classrooms (Wilson & Corbett 2001). Administrators cannot deny the importance of students’ voices, because responding to the growing diversity of student populations demands hearing them (Cushman 2003; Rubin & Silva, 2003). Simply put, educators must listen to students because students are the reason schools exist.

The publications in the following section were chosen because they specifically address listening to student voice. Included are empirical studies, theoretical perspectives and critical reflections that can be used to guide and form the basis of student inclusive school change.

Cushman, Kathleen. (2003) *Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students*. New York: The New Press.

Summary: This book challenges readers to listen to the voices of those most affected by education reform: students. Throughout the book, editor Cushman introduces us to the opinions, experiences, ideas and knowledge of forty students who are from groups often seen as the “hardest to reach” students: immigrants, students of color, and low income students. The students tackle a variety of problems, including classroom behavior and how to help students with learning challenges. They also dispense a variety of thoughts about dealing with misbehavior, teaching English language learners, and more.

This book advocates that students become informants and advocates to teachers on what works and does not work in their classes. It offers practical advice to educators from forty high schools students across the nation. The author unveils a pragmatic outline of advice from high school students to teachers, covering a variety of topics and themes. There are detailed accounts, summary lists and worksheets spread throughout the book that are designed to help teachers actually listen to their students, and to change their methods to best support students.

The author suggests all educators listen to students, and offers the following steps for teachers as they engage students in discussions about school: Come up with questions you really care about; Gather a group of students willing to express their thoughts; Write everything down; Ask for evidence; Analyze the material together, and; Value the difference in opinions.

Throughout the book students provide a great deal of valuable information for educators. Speaking about academic work, a student remarks, “I think one of the only ways people learn something alien is to relate it to their own experience. If a teacher can connect geometry and angles to my interest in art or to being an actor, that works. Even though I know I didn’t grow up with math, I know enough because he relates it to me” (p13). Another student, talking about teacher readiness, says, “It feels like we’re being

punished when the teacher doesn't know the subject well enough to help students. The student has to move on the next year to a higher level, and they'll be stumped in the next year. It's kind of not fair" (p24).

Conclusion: This book illustrates the gamete of hopes students have for schools, and provides vital details for educators to meet the diverse visions students share. Instead of wanting total control, students want fairness and respect in schools, between educators and students and among students themselves. By listening to students through constructive, meaningful dialogues that result in change, educators can take valuable steps towards creating transparent, interdependent relationships in their classrooms and schools.

Kushman, J. & Shanessey, J. (Eds). (1997) *Look Who's Talking Now: Student Views of Restructuring Schools*. Portland, OR: NWREL.
www.nwrel.org/scpd/scc/studentvoices

Summary: This book is the story of a collaborative project that included researchers, teachers, administrators, students, university professors and parents who explored how to find out what students think about school. Seven case studies were conducted that represented the views of more than 1,000 students from across the nation. The findings offer a broad palette of information for school reformers, and include suggestions about including students' experiences, ideas, and opinions in school change.

This collection of research studies from across the nation offers a compelling backdrop to current school reform practices. Researchers found that listening to students can achieve important goals: Saving time for school leaders by gaining early student commitment and focusing restructuring work in the right places; Providing valuable lenses for educators to see whether their reform efforts are successful; Challenging adults to examine their own assumptions about student learning through the eyes of students, and; Treating students as responsible agents of change rather than products of change.

Data-gathering methods focused singularly on students, and included focus groups, written surveys, individual interviews, small group interviews, interviews anchored by classroom observation, videotaping, audio taping, and note taking. A few cases engaged students as researchers. The

following conclusions were drawn from the data gathered in the studies: 1) *Students are articulate and aware.* They generally give thoughtful, honest answers to questions about their learning experiences and they are conscious of the restructuring and reform processes going on in their schools. 2) *Listening to students and acting on what they say is not the norm.* Though teachers and staff were open to hearing what students had to say, schools were often at a loss about what to do with the data. 3) *There are many ways to find out what students think.* There are also many ways to involve students and faculty in the research and inquiry process, and to integrate the inquiry results into the school improvement process.

There is also a section on what researchers learned, organized into the following topical areas: conducting student-led group interviews, strategies for recording interviews, maintaining quality research, involving all stakeholders in data analysis, knowing how and what to ask students, and sharing the results.

Look Who's Talking concludes by outlining methods that schools can use to gather data from students in a short time frame. The authors also review planning and preparation, focusing and designing the research, designing interview methods, collecting and analyzing data, developing feedback, and using student data for school improvement.

Conclusion: This publication provides necessary support for the inclusion of students in education reform efforts by detailing a variety of research practices across the country. As a result, the stories of listening to students detailed here illustrate that student-inclusive school change can be a successful, powerful process for all who are involved.

Shultz, J., Cook-Sather, A. (Eds). (2001) *In Our Own Words: Students' Perspectives On School*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Summary: This book features the writing of eight student/adult teams, each sharing their feelings and perspectives of students about school. The teams consisted of middle school, high school, and college students who worked in collaboration with their classroom teachers and university researchers. The final chapter documents major issues encountered by teachers and researchers in co-publishing with student authors.

This publication is the only one of its kind to engage students as coauthors throughout the process. The editors offer the voices of students as testimonies to the effects of education reform. After an introductory chapter that explores the students' writing from an adult perspective, the student authors explore important issues in school change, including: identity and diversity, curricula, rules, skipping class, real-world learning, and the complexities of education reform. The authors offer a final chapter about the process of engaging the students in critical reflection and education writing.

There are useful ideas presented throughout the book, however, while some are directly accessible to readers, others must be extrapolated from the writing. An example comes from the chapter, "Our World." A student author wrote, "There's a lot of reasons to keep bilingual education. For example, people that don't know any English, like my mom and dad, don't expect to learn English on their own. They thought that they would have a teacher of their own to make their time easier. But it didn't happen that way" (p37).

This book also embodies an uneasy tension involved in listening to students: Is it the job of the adult to "interpret" students' words in order to make students' commentary more accessible to adults, or should the ideas, experiences, opinions and knowledge of students be unfettered? The final student-written chapter of the book illustrates this tension. The students in a girls-only writing project wrote a chapter entitled, "Writing the Wrong." However, instead of letting the students' writing speak for itself, their adult co-authors offered specific recommendations for improving schools, which they said were "embedded" in student freewriting (p163). The reader is left to decide the appropriateness of this approach.

As they reflected on the rewards of writing this book, the editors offered several benefits, which for the students included the opportunities to: Have their voices heard; see their names in print; realize they can have an impact on school practices, and; enjoy and learn from the collaborative writing process (p176).

Conclusion: The authors in this volume illustrate that issues of reassurance and concrete support are central to including students in school change. This book demonstrates that by meaningfully involving students, educators can acknowledge the authority students have, and give credence to the contributions young people can make to school improvement.

Wilson, B., & Corbett, H.D. (2001) *Listening To Urban Kids: School Reform And The Teachers They Want*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Summary: This book provides a broad account of what middle school students at several low-performing schools think about their education. Based on the three-year study conducted by Wilson and Corbett in five Philadelphia middle schools, the authors conclude that successful school reform should become noticeable in what students say about school. They argue that students' input should be an important part of planning, implementing, and adjusting reform.

The authors of this publication share students' unaltered comments about a variety of topics that have direct relevance in school change. The second chapter addresses the changes that students said they witnessed during the three-year study period. The next chapter highlights the students' descriptions of the differences in pedagogy, subject content, and learning environment as they moved from classroom to classroom. The fourth chapter contains the most crucial section of the book, emphasizing the value of students as constructive education critics. The remainder of the book discusses students' experiences in middle school, the implications of the students' descriptions and insights for educational reform, and the value of using students as resources on the progress of reform.

The researchers originally conducted a series of interviews with a cohort of 247 sixth grade students from six schools. Over three years the number was reduced to 153. Interviewing was an informal process that happened in casual settings throughout the schools, with the researchers emphasizing a casual approach in order to make students more comfortable. The book

relies heavily on direct quotes from students, maintaining their original grammar. Throughout the book there is minimal commentary by the authors.

The book offers several important thoughts from students:

- ◆ Students value teachers who give them the extra help they need to succeed and explain their lessons clearly.
- ◆ Students said that they want teachers who believe in them.
- ◆ Students not only value having a variety of activities in the classroom, they value teachers who use content that mirrors real life, making schoolwork relevant and meaningful.

Conclusion: An important conclusion of the study comes from the authors' advocacy for "reforming with, not for, students" (p126). Distinguishing between students as "beneficiaries" or "participants", the authors call for educators to explore how successful any reform truly is. This is particularly important when reform practices runs counter to what the literature on change recommends – that is, engaging the recipients as main contributors to the process. According to this study, if education leaders listened to students, "they would find out that they have invaluable partners in the educational enterprise – if only students had the chance" (p128).

Partnering with Students

Radical. Revolutionary. Inconceivable. Unnecessary. These words hang like trophies on the mantle of student inclusive school change, not because they are particularly honorable or grandiose, but because these accusations have been proven untrue. Today, in schools around the world, Meaningful Student Involvement engages students as active and empowered partners in inclusive, interdependent school change. This means more than simply *listening* to students: it means *engaging* students as concerned partners, coherent contributors, and equal agents of change in schools.

This idea is not new. As early as 1938, progressive education pioneer John Dewey recognized that the habits of democratic citizenship necessarily develop in civic roles for students in schools (Dewey 1938). In 1970, ground-breaking educator Paulo Freire wrote, “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” Throughout the 1980s and 1990s a growing number of writers have advocated critical departures from traditional roles for students in school, calling for adults to partner with students in classroom pedagogy and school leadership (Delpit 1988; Kurth-Schai 1988; Giroux 1989; McLaren 1989; SooHoo 1993; hooks 1994; Levin 1994; Rudduck & Flutter 2000; Fielding 2001).

The pool of examples, evidence, and critical reflection that explores students as partners in school change has grown over the past ten years, and is currently reaching a critical juncture. That juncture is located in the heart of the growing number of classrooms and schools where students and educators are working together to re-imagine one another’s roles and responsibilities. These pioneers are placing themselves as partners in learning, teaching and leading schools. Everyday they are challenging their peers – both students and teachers – to re-examine the long-held view that students should be passive recipients of teaching. This new reality insists that young people are the central co-creators of knowledge, virtually demanding their vital participation in the improvement and ongoing operation of schools.

Meaningful Student Involvement synthesizes this tidal wave of energy by promoting the infusion of ideas, knowledge, opinions and experiences of students through education reform efforts (Fletcher 2003b). In conducting school change efforts, many educators face the necessity of proving their pedagogy is research-proven.

The following literature examines student inclusive school change by identifying activities, outcomes, and barriers to Meaningful Student Involvement.

Cook-Sather, Allison. (2002) "Authorizing Students' Perspectives: Toward Trust, Dialogue, and Change in Education," *Educational Researcher* 31(4), 3-14.
www.aera.net/pubs/er/toc/er3104.htm

Summary: In accordance with a hundred years of public school practices, the past twenty years of school reform efforts have been an adult-driven process that relies on adult ideas and conceptualizations about education. The argument for authorizing student perspectives runs counter to these practices. In order to truly engage students in school reform, advocates for student inclusive school change must change the minds of adults and the structures of schools.

In the introduction to her paper Cook-Sather introduces the history and foundation of her concept of "authorizing" the perspectives of students. She writes, "At the root of the terms that underlie the following discussion – authorize, authority, author, and authoritative – is power: the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter" (p3). Cook-Sather then provides a preliminary synopsis of research supporting her theory, and places this work in critical theory, couching the concept of "authorizing students perspective" in the work of writers Henry Giroux and Michelle Fine. She then introduces a broad range of activities by researchers and educators and identifies the diverse backgrounds of those activities.

Cook-Sather examines the history of popular attitudes about young people, exploring early nineteenth century philosophy and mid-twentieth century psychology. She then identifies a variety of attempts at engaging students in school change in the last fifty years, including the work of constructivist and critical education theorists. Diversifying the palette of interest in student voice, Cook-Sather also explores interconnections with postmodern feminists and social critics, as well as recent developments in the medical and legal realms that offer social contexts for engaging participants in institutional transformation.

Cook-Sather believes that students should not just be *listened to*, but also be *engaged in* the work of school reform. She notes research which showed that as well as being engaged in change work, it is essential for

students to *see themselves* as change agents. Cook-Sather acknowledges several important nuances, including the importance of every educator asking their students what they think directly, rather than relying on studies and indirect surveys. She discusses the challenges educators may face, including logistical, psychological, intellectual and personal barriers, and describes possibilities of overcoming these hurdles. Finally, Cook-Sather proposes that student involvement advocates “go beyond what has already been accomplished.” She suggests that instead of simply rethinking where students can have power and authority in schools, actually create sustainable activities where that power takes form and purpose within schools.

Conclusion: This paper provides an important theoretical construct for educators to develop their own opportunities for Meaningful Student Involvement. The background information provides ample justification for action, while Cook-Sather’s experience encourages readers to take action on their own.

Fielding, M. (Ed.) (2001) “Special issue on student voice,” *Forum* 43(2).

Summary: This journal addresses multiple issues inherent in Meaningful Student Involvement, and challenges previous work on students’ power, student engagement and student advocacy for school change. The topics cover a variety of areas including democratic practices in school, the validity and authenticity of “student voice,” the multiplicity of students’ experiences, and the authority of students in school.

The authors in this journal reflect the growing interest in student voice from a variety of perspectives, including those of current students, former students, professors, researchers and educators. Careful navigation of the topics provides a roadmap of Meaningful Student Involvement by examining classroom-centered activities and school governance programs. Authors from the United Kingdom, Chile and the United States detail their experiences and challenges through critical lenses. They also provide reflections on how their research could have been improved.

The findings are as diverse as the writers. In the first three articles, the student writers share their perspectives on the necessity of “student voice.” They identify different ways to infuse students into the curriculum-making

process through team-based learning and engaging students as researchers. The fourth chapter is one of three case studies included. The author explores how a student research program progressed from viewing students as data sources to students learning about and conducting the research. Issues raised throughout the remainder of the journal raise several vital questions, including:

- ◆ Do schools actively deny the creativity and responsibility student have within them to change schools?
- ◆ How and what can educators learn from students whose voices they don't want to hear?
- ◆ What are the issues and opportunities of working with students to conduct research in schools?
- ◆ Where else are schools engaging students as school change agents?

In the final chapter editor Michael Fielding provides a remarkable framework for evaluating the conditions of student voice and offers an appraisal of student voice as a force for genuine change in schools. It effectively serves as an evaluation framework for assessing the meaningfulness of student involvement. This framework exists in a space that has always existed, yet never before been occupied. (See below)

Conclusion: This journal provides essential documentation of existing efforts that promote student inclusive school change. It provides detailed, diverse, and replicable accounts of success. The international perspectives, the stories, and the tools offered in this publication provide important considerations for student inclusive change efforts.

Framework for Assessing Student Voice

Speaking

- ◆ *Who* is allowed to speak?
- ◆ *To whom* are they allowed to speak?
- ◆ *What* are they allowed to speak about?
- ◆ What *language* is allowed or encouraged?

Listening

- ◆ *Who* is listening?
- ◆ *Why* are they listening?
- ◆ *How* are they listening?

Skills

- ◆ Are the skills of dialogue *encouraged and supported* through training or other appropriate means?
- ◆ Are those skills understood, developed, and practiced in the *context of democratic values and dispositions*?
- ◆ Are those skills themselves *transformed* by those values and dispositions?

Attitudes and Dispositions

- ◆ How do those involved *regard each other*?
- ◆ To what degree are the *principle of equal value* and the *dispositions of care* felt reciprocally and demonstrated through the reality of daily encounter?

Systems

- ◆ *How often* does dialogue and encounter in which student voice is centrally important occur?
- ◆ *Who decides*?
- ◆ How do the systems enshrining the value and necessity of student voice mesh with or *relate to other organizational arrangements* (particularly those involving adults)?

Organizational Culture

- ◆ Do the *cultural norms and values* of the school proclaim the centrality of student voice within the context of education as a shared responsibility and shared achievement?

Taken from Fielding, M. (2001). "Beyond the rhetoric of student voice: new departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling? *Forum* 43(2): 100-109. [Author's emphasis included]

- ◆ Do the *practices, traditions, and routine daily encounters* demonstrate values supportive of student voice?

Spaces and the Making of Meaning

- ◆ *Where* are the public spaces (physical and metaphorical) in which these encounters might take place?
- ◆ *Who controls* them?
- ◆ What *values* shape their being and their use?

Action

- ◆ What *action* is taken?
- ◆ *Who feels responsible*?
- ◆ *What happens* if aspirations and good intentions are not realized?

The Future

- ◆ Do we need *new structures*?
- ◆ Do we need *new ways of relating to others*?

Kurth-Schai, R. (1988) "The roles of youth in society: A reconceptualization," *The Educational Forum* 52(2): 113-133.
www.macalester.edu/~kurthschai/PDF%27s/youth.pdf

Summary: In this article Kurth-Schai offers an eloquent argument that proposes a major realignment of the purpose of schooling, and consequently, the roles of students in schools. She explores the current perceptions of young people according to educational practices; a variety of literature; and the ways that society's perception of children and youth are changing today. This document climaxes in an exciting exploration of potential roles for all young people in schools.

In 1988 very few education experts were considering the potential of student involvement as a lever in school change, let alone engaging students in meaningful activities and powerful relationships that would actually renegotiate the purpose and possibilities of the modern school. In a literary environment that focused on dissecting national reports about school failure and student apathy, Kurth-Schai created a powerful proposal that continues to impact schools today. This article summarizes her vision, and provides significant research to support it. The proposition that students can be powerful contributors to schools and society is relentlessly justified

throughout this piece. Every paragraph reconsiders the necessity, the rationale, or the possibilities of Meaningful Student Involvement. Kurth-Schai proposed that reconceptualizing the roles of young people in society has powerful implications on schools. She offers three parallel processes for that action:

1. *Reconceptualizing the role of youth in the classroom.* Where perceiving students as “receptacles of knowledge” was appropriate in a past workforce that relied on standardization and specialization, today it is not. To achieve the flexibility and innovation that today’s marketplace values, students should be engaged as *creators, disseminators, and implementers* of knowledge. Specific roles should reflect the need for the *educatorchild*, a student who learns the responsibility of designing, selecting, and implementing curriculum, evaluation procedures, and motivational strategies for the purpose of learning about teaching, and for successfully teaching their peers.
2. *Reconceptualizing areas of curricular emphasis.* Subject matter and instructional methods should be selected to emphasize 1) student-directed learning experiences; 2) cross-generational learning experiences; 3) exploratory learning experiences; 4) integrative learning experiences; 5) cooperative learning experiences, and; 6) action-oriented learning experiences. Students should also have the opportunity to A) determine the areas of freedom, responsibility, and service in which they would like to participate; B) assume primary control of administrative processes, and; C) receive recognition and/or compensation for the services they provide.
3. *Reconceptualizing the role of the school in society.* If schools are going to support young people as they exercise higher levels of personal freedom and social responsibility, schools cannot continue to move towards the academic “right.”

Conclusion: This article can offer a comprehensive outline to people looking for more substantive theoretical information to support Meaningful Student Involvement in their classroom and throughout their schools.

Levin, B. (1999) "Putting students at the centre in education reform," *International Journal of Educational Change*.

http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~levin/res_pub_files/putting_students_at_the_centre_i.pdf

Summary: This document argues that in order for school reform to be effective, students need to participate in the school improvement process. A foundation and framework are explored that engage students in defining, shaping, managing and implementing school improvement practices.

This paper offers a concise, detailed exploration of the principles and rationale that support student involvement from a practical perspective that focuses on progressive activities. After exploring the recent history of student involvement, the author provides the following arguments for increasing student involvement:

1. Effective implementation of change requires participation and buy-in from all those involved; students no less than teachers;
2. Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make reform efforts more successful and improve implementation;
3. Students' views can help mobilize staff and parent opinion in favor of meaningful reform;
4. Constructivist learning, which is increasingly important to high standards reforms, requires a more active student role in schooling;
5. Students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement (p3).

Levin explains that the first three are related to organizational health; the last two have to do specifically with how learning occurs. He then continues to carefully detail the diverse literature supporting his arguments by including specific sources from the areas of education, psychology, sociology and business.

In a section exploring the role of the student in school improvement, Levin provides three steps schools should consider:

1. Involve several students in formal management processes;
2. Provide training and support students, and;

3. Ask students to organize their own parallel process of discussion of change that could bring many more students into the deliberative process.

Levin makes a special note that educators should engage students in all grade levels in these efforts and not limit participation to high school students.

Conclusion: This document provides a concise, deliberate rationale for Meaningful Student Involvement while offering broad resources and diverse thinking for school improvement. The author situates Meaningful Student Involvement as a key component among current education reform practices and literature.

Mitra, D. (2003) "Student voice in school reform: Reframing student-teacher relationships," *McGill Journal of Education*, 38:2. 289-304.
www.education.mcgill.ca/edmje.htm

Mitra, D. (2001) "Opening the floodgates: Giving students a voice in school reform." *Forum* 43 (2). 91–94.

Summary: Both of these articles are based on the same study. Mitra's research is from one of the few studies in the United States that explores the process by which students can be engaged in schools. In the first article, she draws upon a two-and-a-half year period in which she conducted hundreds of interviews and observations at one urban high school. In the second article, Mitra conducts a comparative analysis of two schools that employed "student voice" in school change efforts. Mitra identifies and examines the strategies – both successful and failed – that were used by the schools to listen to, understand, and actively engage students in school change.

In today's schools, teachers – those most often in contact with students – are often the least informed about what students really think. This project sought to rectify that imbalance of information by realigning the roles of students in two schools that sought to engage students in change. In order to accomplish this, these schools conducted a variety of activities, including student focus groups, in-class discussions, and student involvement in staff training. Activities met various measures of success. In one school, teachers invited failing students to participate in a discussion to explore reasons for failure. A teacher present at these focus groups described the student responses as "very honest, very serious, their chance to

contribute... They weren't saying what we wanted them to say." (2001, p91). At the other school, Mitra found students ready to invest a great deal of time engaging in teacher-focused activities, including participating in teacher research, assessment development, and textbook adoption (2003, p292).

Mitra found important benefits from having an ethnically and socially mixed group of students working together on projects designed to enhance student responsibility and status in school. "When the group first came together as a community of practice, they didn't yet have the language to articulate who they were. And this contributed to their struggles to agree upon a joint enterprise... The students needed to get along with students different than them – students from different cliques, who speak different language, who are on different tracks in the school's academic system" (Mitra, as quoted in Rudduck & Flutter 2004).

Conclusion: These two articles ultimately remind readers that school change does not happen in a vacuum. There are multiple supports and outcomes that must be considered in individual contexts. Most importantly, the articles reinforce the fact that Meaningful Student Involvement is a growing practice that will significantly alter the dynamics of schools and improve teaching and learning.

Oldfather, P. (Ed). (1995a) "Learning from Student Voices." Theory into Practice 43 (2). www.coe.ohio-state.edu/tip

Summary: This journal offers a comprehensive scan of research surrounding Meaningful Student Involvement by highlighting what "student voice" is, and how it can be engaged throughout schools. The authors cover a variety of topics and offer rationale for listening to students, barriers to student involvement, engaging "student voice" in constructivist classrooms, issues of social justice and authenticity, and how pre-service teachers can – and must – learn from students.

The authors in this journal offer a variety of perspectives on "student voice," offering optimistic predictions, detailed accounts, thoughtful reflections, and cautionary criticisms that strengthen the argument for Meaningful Student Involvement. The stories told here encourage educators to seriously engage students in changing classrooms and teaching. "Learning from children's voices allows us to know a deeper level of who children are as

learners and, because we have that knowledge, to expand and enrich our sense of what it means to teach” (p130). The same journal also warns that teachers “must resist the temptation to glamorize student voices, and recognize that the multiple voices that students bring to the classroom, while potentially possessing some elements of resistance and transformation, are likely to be imbued with status quo values” (O’Loughlin 1995 p112).

In editing this journal, professor Penny Oldfather sought to “reexamine fundamental assumptions about the purposes of education, the nature of knowledge, the processes of coming to know, and the roles of students as the principal stakeholders in education” (p86). According to Oldfather, various forms of constructivism, critical theory, and feminist thought influenced these articles. Throughout the journal, educational research was scrutinized using the interpretive methodologies of students’ perceptions. “This analysis gives further support to the thesis that there is much to be learned from students’ voices” (p86). Articles explore case studies and critical theories, encouraging the reader to explore practice and examine their own assumptions simultaneously.

The final chapters detail two experiences of students listening to other students’ experiences. In the first of the two, students participate in a multi-year research project exploring teachers’ perceptions about student motivation to learn. The last chapter details a conversation with several students who originally participated in a structured students-as-researchers project, then continued their study after the program. This conversation captures their multi-faceted thoughts about research, student involvement, and motivation.

Conclusion: This journal offers a comprehensive examination of all aspects of Meaningful Student Involvement, particularly exploring specific roles for students as agents of school change. This exploration of the barriers to involvement, multiple identities, and the purpose of “student voice” is centrally important to the library of information supporting Meaningful Student Involvement.

Reed, C. (1998) Student Leadership and Restructuring: A Case Study. Ann Harbor, MI: Available from UMI Dissertation Services. www.lib.umi.com/dissertations/

Summary: This research study begins by exploring the irony of how schools encourage students to take a leadership role in student activities and participate in social change work through community service, yet rarely considers engaging students in school change. The study examines one school where students were engaged in dialogues with educators and administrators about school change.

Through interviews, focus groups, documentation of meetings and activities, document analysis, and the involvement of students as researchers, this research considered the following questions:

- ◆ Roles that students played within the school and why;
- ◆ Who the students were that tended to get involved;
- ◆ How students were involved in school reform efforts;
- ◆ What was being done to build capacity for student involvement, and;
- ◆ How students, teachers, and administrators viewed this involvement.

This publication details many important findings. Reed found that there are natural tensions between students, teachers, and administrators based on roles and role expectations. Another important discovery showed that the building leader's vision and fundamental beliefs set the tone for student involvement. Reed learned that five factors influence student involvement: student readiness, apathy, coordination, teachers' readiness, and clearly understood limitations for students. Finally, and importantly, this research proved that Meaningful Student Involvement can offer a variety of benefits, including keen insight for educators, energy and motivation to keep things moving, heightened "buy in" for school goals, increased tolerance between diverse student groups and students and adults, and the experience of true empowerment by student researchers.

Conclusion: This research finds that many students wanted to have a voice in what happens regarding their education. Students have a lot of important knowledge and opinions to share about curriculum and instruction and are vocal about academic and social injustices. Many of these views challenge teacher and administrator thinking about what occurs in school. While student involvement is not a panacea, it can lay the groundwork for better relationships throughout schools.

Rubin, B. & Silva, E. (Eds.) (2003) Critical Voices in School Reform: Students Living Through Change. New York & London: RoutledgeFalmer.
www.routledgefalmer.com

Summary: This book addresses student inclusive school change by examining a series of activities thought to do just that: engage students as agents in educational transformation. The authors examine a variety of activities, analyzing both challenges and successes in many areas of social justice in school reform, including race, class, and gender equity.

This collection of studies is presented in two sections that include details on research conducted in a variety of settings. In the first, the editors attempt to “illustrate the richly nuanced view of school reform that emerges through student-centered research.” Overall, the researchers contend that engaging students in the work of education reform is rare, and when it does happen students are presented in “fixed and uncomplicated” language that misrepresents them. In the second section, the authors detail five studies of reform projects that “take into account, build upon, and address the specific needs and concerns of those students at the bottom of the achievement gap.” According to the students involved, Meaningful Student Involvement helped them navigate learning environments that are discouraging and even hostile towards them.

The chapters scan a variety of activities and environments where student inclusive school change is happening. From the introductory chapter through the conclusion, the reader is presented with research that supports Meaningful Student Involvement in school decision-making and research, students’ perceptions of detracking, gender, school support, and learning environments, students’ experiences of identity-based curricular reform and school governance. Researchers offer critical analyses of the experience, reflecting on their own thinking and offering suggestions for improvements.

Important findings include:

- ◆ Adults must consider the complexities of inviting students to participate in democratic processes that have never been modeled for them (p29).
- ◆ Students must have realistic space and time to become part of the process of school change, particularly if they do not experience schools as inclusive environments (p29).

- ◆ Circumstances for engaging students in education reform work cannot be standardized or identically duplicated across diverse communities (p149).
- ◆ School reformers should silence their own voices in order to create school structures that meaningfully engage culturally marginalized students (p149).

Conclusion: The studies presented here advocate for social and educational justice as the purposes of Meaningful Student Involvement. The research successfully argues that adults look to students for more than answers – that we must look to students to become central players in the ongoing process of school change.

Rudduck, J. & Flutter, J. (2004) *How to Improve Your School: Giving Pupils a Voice*. New York and London: Continuum.

Summary: This book successfully argues that a range of circumstances necessitates that students must be seen and engaged differently than ever before, and that schools can and should change to encourage that transformation. The authors draw on a variety of evidence in a comprehensive examination of the roles of students today, offering detailed accounts of students' ability to actively contribute to school change.

This book is the seminal publication regarding student inclusive school change. The authors successfully navigate a wide variety of information, from the history of young people involved in formalized learning to the current activities, assumptions, and advocates calling for Meaningful Student Involvement. Their succinct accounts offer a strong foundation from which a wide range of research and advocacy can be conducted. This is the most comprehensive scan of what student inclusive school change looks like in schools today. Rudduck and Flutter spend several chapters explaining research that consulted students in school change. The program, called *The Learning School*, explored three successive groups of young people who evaluated secondary schools around the world. After being trained in basic research methods, student researchers spent six weeks in teams looking at each of the eight schools. Important barriers are also identified. This project demonstrated that not only are students taking different roles in schools, but that it is also important to think and reflect on aspects of learning that are important to them (p28).

Another project highlighted the way Meaningful Student Involvement actually transformed U.K. schools by tracking the changes in policy and practice that reflected students' comments. According to the authors, teachers gain a variety of benefits from student inclusive school change that include:

- ◆ A more open perception of young people's capabilities;
- ◆ A readiness to change thinking and practice in light of these perceptions;
- ◆ A practical agenda for improvement and a renewed sense of excitement in teaching (p152).

The book continues by mapping the multiple dimensions through which students can influence change, provide multiple arguments for young people's involvement, and identify multiple issues and agendas that student involvement advocates seek to fulfill. The closing chapters of the book address the educational foundation of student involvement, and offer a conclusion that resolves to put students in central, meaningful, and sustainable roles throughout schools.

Conclusion: By providing a broad cross-examination of theory, research and action, this book offers the most effective validation of student inclusive school change to date. This is not just an important book for student advocates; it is an essential read for all school improvement leaders.

Tolman, J., Ford, P. and Irby, M. (2003) *What Works in Education Reform: Putting Young People at the Center*. Baltimore, MD: International Youth Foundation.
www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/papers/whatworksedref.pdf

Summary: A comprehensive guide to student inclusive school change that offers a variety of international case studies, tools, and resources for promoting "youth-centered" school reform.

This guide was created by the International Youth Foundation with the goal of fostering connectivity between current school reform beliefs and practices with the growing field of youth development. The publication provides a summary of current education reforms taking place around the world,

including programs in Germany, Mexico and the Philippines. The key elements of the studies include how youth-centered school reform was happening in schools; when and where the reforms took place, and; whom they affected. In the introduction the authors propose that putting young people at the center of education reform adds a necessary efficacy to school reform.

Four main research questions are used to explore youth-centered education reform:

- ◆ ***What is it?*** What are our hopes for young people and what are their goals? Readiness for work, citizenship, family, and lifelong learning are historic goals. Competence, confidence, character, connections and contribution are new goals.
- ◆ ***How does it happen?*** Through shifts in the practice of education, including safe, supportive and engaging environments; and changes in instruction and pedagogy.
- ◆ ***Where and when?*** High quality learning experiences happen in multiple settings, including where young people live, work, play, and contribute, as well as the school.
- ◆ ***Who?*** Students, teachers, administrators, families and community members take new roles in youth-centered education reform.

The authors then share a series of case studies that seek to connect the components above by detailing how youth-centered education reform is happening around the world in a variety of settings. Youth-centered education reform is thoroughly explored in a variety of chapters. One exciting chapter is called, “New Roles for Youth: Youth Engagement and Education Reform.” The authors examine the ways that the actions, voices and contributions of students can and do bring about educational change. They detail the necessity of student engagement in successful schools by proposing that, “when youth engagement is made a central principle of pedagogy – by building choice, voice, active roles, and opportunities to contribute – the quality of learning improves.”

Conclusion: This important publication substantiates the efficacy of student inclusive school change by offering a global perspective absent in many publications. This is an important contribution to the growing collection of literature supporting this area.

Conclusion

*... Thus the dream becomes not one man's dream alone,
But a community dream.
Not my dream alone,
But our dream.
Not my world alone,
But your world and my world,
Belonging to all the hands who build*

- from "Freedom's Plow" by Langston Hughes

This research guide is the first publication to attempt to compile important research on Meaningful Student Involvement. Many different aspects have been explored, including the purpose of schools, the roles of students, the control of adults, and the intentions of society. All of these have been selected using the lens of Meaningful Student Involvement – a transformation of the roles of students for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy.

This publication explores the most significant research to date that examines Meaningful Student Involvement. Strengths of the research presented include:

- The large number and variety of publications that were reviewed and the consistency of their findings about student inclusive school change;
- The international perspective of many of the publications, including representation from Canada, Chile, Australia, and the United Kingdom, displaying a growing global interest in Meaningful Student Involvement; and
- The inclusion of dissertations, which generally involve a rigorous review by a committee of experienced colleagues.

However, the publications that were chosen for this guide have a few limitations:

- They are predominantly qualitative, limiting the ability to generalize the findings;
- Most were carried out in retrospect, where participants reflected back on their transformative experience, as opposed to observing and recording the learning experience as it was actually happening; and
- Most failed to review previous studies involving student inclusive school change, offering little critique of existing research in the field.

While the publications included in this research guide are significant, they cannot possibly appeal to the needs of every practitioner. The following appendix provides a listing of literature available on Meaningful Student Involvement, including students as education planners, researchers, teachers, evaluators, decision-makers and advocates.

As illustrated throughout this guide, there exists a blossoming hope for Meaningful Student Involvement. This hope carries the responsibility of meaningfully involving *all* students and educators in positive, powerful, and sustainable school change; and consequently, involving every person in meaningful ways throughout their life. As Langston Hughes wrote, "...your world and my world, belonging to all the hands who build."

Appendix

The following publications are included here to encourage readers to learn more about the research supporting specific aspects of Meaningful Student Involvement. Important information can be found about Meaningful Student Involvement in general, as well as students as education planners, researchers, teachers, evaluators, decision-makers and advocates. For more information visit: www.SoundOut.org.

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Supporting Organizations

The Freechild Project partnered with the HumanLinks Foundation to create this publication and its accompanying website, www.SoundOut.org - promoting meaningful student involvement in school change.

The Freechild Project

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Freechild was founded in 2000 as a youth-driven training ground, think tank, resource agency, and advocacy group for young people seeking to play a larger role in their schools and communities. Freechild offers training and consultation in many areas, including school improvement, program development, and community building. Our website is a worldwide resource center for social change by and with young people that includes a diverse listing of information around youth empowerment, including everything from activist learning to youth suffrage, and several free publications on youth leadership, cooperative games and more.

HumanLinks Foundation

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The HumanLinks Foundation was established in 1999 to help communities in Washington State make systemic improvements in Education, Health Care and Sustainable Agriculture. HumanLinks strives to strengthen voices and connections to make these essential systems more effective and responsible. HumanLinks develops partnerships that leverage resources in new ways to blend values, ideas, information and best practices.

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www.SoundOut.org encourages students and adults to work together to transform education and to validate student voice throughout education, from the classroom to the boardroom.

The website is a national online resource center that posts success stories of student-led efforts to improve schools, including those where students participate in researching, planning, evaluating, and advocating for schools.

Hundreds of online publications also make available bibliographies, articles, and research reports about meaningful student involvement.

www.SoundOut.org also provides online discussion forums, links to other resources, and a monthly newsletter.