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Chapter 26
Listening to Students

*Moving from Resilience Research to Youth Development
Practice and School Connectedness*

By Bonnie Benard and Sean Slade

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Listening to Students

Moving from Resilience Research to Youth Development Practice and School Connectedness

BONNIE BENARD AND SEAN SLADE

Last year a young man returned to the center for students with severe emotional and behavioral disorders where I work to talk with the principal. Mike had last seen this young man as he dove head first through a window into the waiting arms of police officers. He had been on a rampage in the school and had locked himself in Mike's office. Mike had wondered over the years where the youth had gone after his release from a juvenile justice program. Now, at age 23, the student returned to discuss the last incident he had had at the school and to express his gratitude to Mike for always taking time to listen. This young man just wanted Mike to know how much that had meant to him. He also told Mike that he was in college and doing well.

(Rockwell, 1998, 16)

This vignette is illustrative of a powerful body of evidence that undergirds and informs the field of positive psychology: research on human resilience in the face of risk, adversity, and challenge. These prospective, longitudinal and developmental studies have followed children, often from birth to adulthood, who were living in high-stress conditions such as poverty and community violence; family disruption and abuse; and parental alcoholism, mental illness, and incarceration (Clausen, 1993; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder & Sameroff, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rutter & Sroufe, 2000; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Werner & Smith, 1992, 2001, 2005; Wilkes, 2002; Vaillant, 2002; Zucker, Wong, Puttler, & Fitzgerald, 2003). The consistent and amazing finding is that most - usually around 70%–75% of these young people - are able to experience life success. These studies inform strengths-based movements such as positive psychology, strengths-based social work practice, youth development, health promotion, and multiple intelligences. The studies identify: (a) resilience as a natural capacity all youth have for healthy development and learning (Masten, 2001; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992); (b) the personal strengths that are the manifestations of engaging this innate resilience (Benard, 1991, 2004; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner & Smith 2001); (c) the characteristics or protective factors of families, schools, programs, and communities that engage innate resilience

(Benard, 1991, 2004; Goldstein & Brooks, 2005 ; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992, 2001, 2005); and (d) adult/caregiver beliefs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Higgins, 1994 ; Luthar & Burak, 2000; Werner & Smith, 1992) as the locus of change.

This chapter focuses on the role of schools in this turnaround process. It illustrates how we have facilitated schools moving from a deficit perspective to a position of resilience using youth development as a practice that partners with students in improving their schools. This approach makes optimal use of strengths-based survey data grounded in resilience theory and research, resilience and data-use training, and partnering with students for program improvement (Benard, 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Masten, 2001). We also highlight how the resiliency framework is effective in interactions with all students and not only those deemed by some to be “at-risk” (Luthar & Burak, 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner, 2005; Benard, 1991; Masten, 2001; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). The underlying theme is that everyone harbors resilience and is able to learn and develop the skills and understandings associated with resilience theory. When this approach is taken, everyone benefits—the individual, the school setting, and the community.

Youth Development Process: Resilience in Action

Resilience research supports a developmental theory of change (Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1963; Rogoff, 2003; see Figure 26.1). When young people experience home, school, and community environments rich in the proven *developmental supports and opportunities* (also called *external assets* or *protective factors*) of caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution, they are much more likely to meet their developmental needs or drives for love, belonging, respect, identity, power, mastery, challenge, and meaning (Benard, 2004; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992).

Resilience can be viewed as a natural developmental wisdom that intrinsically motivates humans to meet their various needs (Masten, 2001; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1982). In turn, the *internal assets* that define healthy development—social competence, problem solving, autonomy

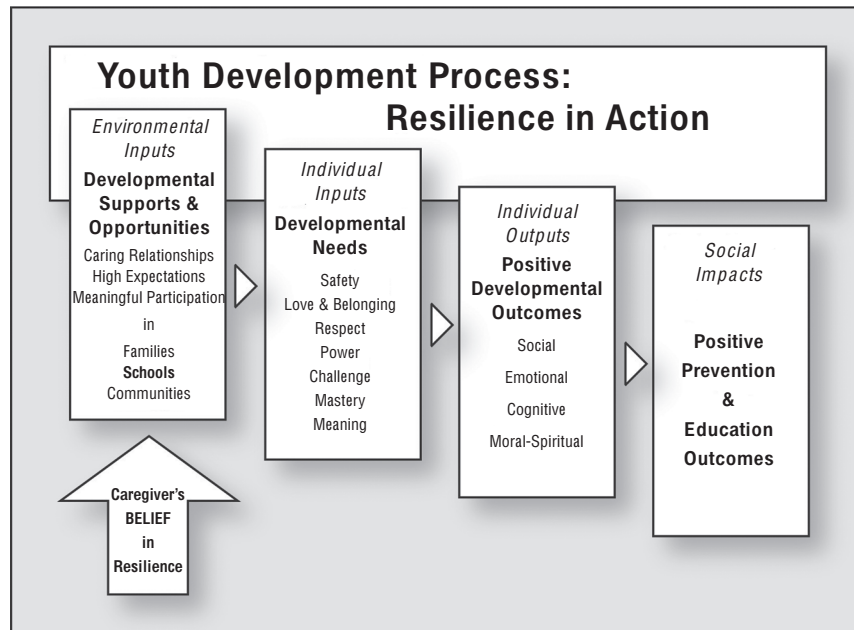


Figure 26.1 Youth development framework.

and identity, and sense of purpose and future—are tapped and nurtured in young people. These internal assets are the natural developmental outcomes for youth who experience homes, schools, communities, and peer groups rich in the three basic developmental supports and opportunities. Moreover, these individual characteristics protect against involvement in health-risk behaviors such as alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and violence—in addition to promoting successful learning (Benard, 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Werner & Smith, 2001). *School connectedness* is a term often used to describe the phenomenon of this development process within the school environment (Akey, 2006; Hanson, Austin, & Lee-Bayha, 2003; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004; Resnick et al., 1997).

The resilience or youth development approach sees the locus of change as the environment, in this case, the teachers and other school staff, so that they will be encouraged and supported in providing these critical supports and opportunities, in becoming the “turnaround” people—and, thereby, schools, “turnaround” places. Turnaround teachers model and create the nurturing and empowering climates that in turn engage young people’s innate resilience. Such climates aid students in developing their capacities for positive developmental outcomes, including their connectedness to school.

Specifically, interventions that tap and nurture student resilience must target teachers and other school staff members’ *belief* in the innate resilience of not only the young people they serve but their own resilience (Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1994; Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta, & LaParo, 2006). Such belief enables teachers and staff to tap into and model the resilience strengths of caring and empathy (*social competence*), insight and imagination (*problem-solving*), self-efficacy and self-awareness (*autonomy*), and hope (*sense of purpose and future*).

Resilience research is supported and reinforced by findings from the social, health, and behavioral sciences that document the significance of caring relationships, high expectation messages, and opportunities for meaningful participation to influence positive health and life outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Deci, 1995; Eccles, & Gootman, 2002; Felner, 2000; Harris, 1998; Herman, 1997; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Noddings, 1992; Putnam, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Sarason, 1990; Steinberg, 2000; Weinstein, 2002). In fact, after reviewing this broad spectrum of research, Benard (2004) concluded that, “Successful development in any human system is dependent on the quality of the relationships, beliefs, and opportunities for participation in that system” (p. 48). In essence, it may be more important to pay attention to *how* teachers implement services than to the actual curriculum, content, or program.

Furthermore, education, prevention, and intervention practices that attempt to promote individual improvements in learning or behavior by direct teaching approaches that do *not* attend to these environmental protective factors—the quality of relationships, messages, and opportunities for participation—do not have positive long-term academic or behavioral change outcomes (Kohn, 1997). This is in contrast to environmental school change approaches like cooperative learning, small group process, adventure learning, arts experience, peer helping, mentoring, and service learning (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004). These latter approaches create opportunities in the context of relationships for young people to achieve academically *and* learn positive life skills and attitudes through direct and ongoing experiences that meet their developmental needs (Benard, 2004).

The Resilience & Youth Development Module of the California Healthy Kids Survey: A Strengths-Based Survey

The movement towards a resilience paradigm and youth development practice in California has been aided by the commitment of the Safe and Healthy Kids Program Office at the California

Department of Education (CDE) to this effort. In 1999, this Office funded WestEd, an educational research and development nonprofit agency, to add an optional Resilience and Youth Development Module (RYDM) to the existing California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), a health-risk behavior survey required by CDE of students in grades 5, 7, 9, and 11 (see www.wested.org/hks).

The RYDM is based on the framework in Figure 26.1, which is described previously in this chapter. The module asks students about the presence of *external assets* (caring relationships, high expectation messages, and opportunities for participation and contribution in their families, schools, communities, and with their peers) as well as six *internal assets* (empathy, cooperation and communication, problem solving, self-efficacy, self-awareness, and goals and aspirations). In 2003, the California Department of Education mandated that all schools in grades 7, 9, and 11 complete at least the school and community assets section of this survey. As of the end of the 2006 school year, over two and a half million students have completed this survey.

Figure 26.2 provides a summary of the percentage of California students who reported “very much true” and “pretty much true” that at their school they have caring teachers, receive high expectation messages, and have opportunities for meaningful participation.

As is clear from this chart, the percentages of which have remained quite consistent over the 6 years of the survey, California schools are falling short in providing students with the key developmental supports and opportunities critical to their healthy development and school and life success. This observation is also consistent with other research on adolescent development that has identified a decrease in developmental supports and opportunities for youth in their adolescent years across American society (Carnegie Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents, 1989; Carnegie Taskforce on Youth Development and Community Programs, 1992; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004).

The results of this neglect is driven home by CHKS researchers who have found that low levels

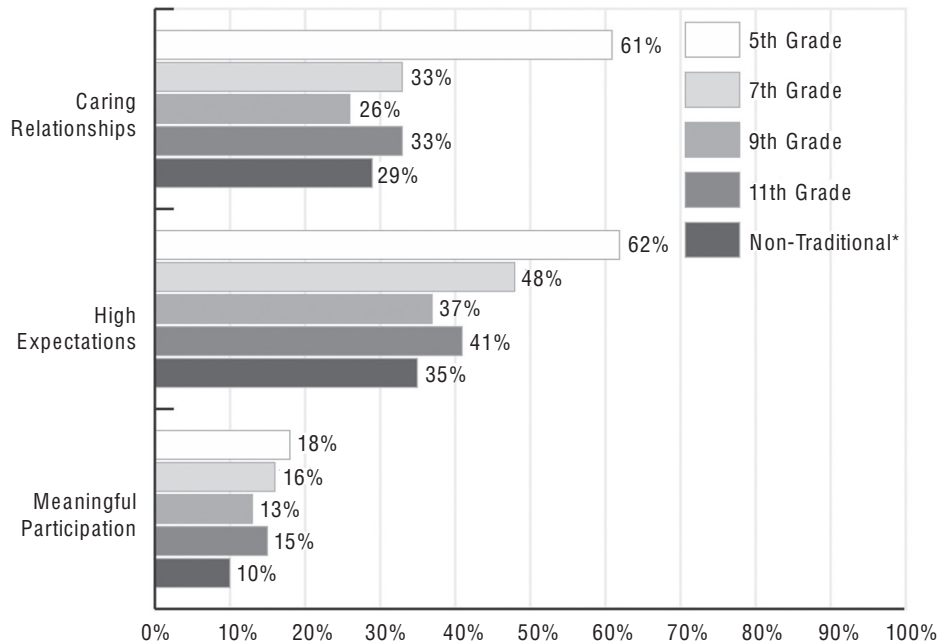


Figure 26.2 How California students rate protective factors in their schools. Percentages based on weighted state aggregate of Fall 2004 to Spring 2006 California Healthy Kids Survey (www.wested.org/chks). N = 838,676. (* Non-Traditional includes students grades 9–12 in Court, Community Day, and other Alternative School Settings.)

of these supports and opportunities in schools are associated with students' greater involvement in health risk behaviors such as binge drinking, marijuana use, bullying behavior, depression, and gang involvement (Hanson, Austin, & Lee-Bayha, 2003; WestEd, 1999). However, the converse is also true—the higher the reported levels of these protective factors, the less students report involvement in risk behaviors. Even more salient and compelling to schools is the remarkable finding that the presence of these protective factors (caring relationships and high expectations in the school and opportunities for meaningful involvement in the community) are also causally related to students scoring higher on California's statewide standardized test (Hanson et al., 2003).

Given the pressure schools throughout the United States are under to address No Child Left Behind mandates and pass statewide standardized tests, educators must demonstrate to their respective school communities that educational practice informed by resiliency and youth development increases student's connectedness to schools and, thereby impacts *both* students' healthy development and school and life success.

The next section provides an example of how data from a strengths-based survey, such as the RYDM, can be a catalyst for helping school staff raise awareness about the power they have to make a difference in young people's lives through their relationships, beliefs, and willingness to listen and share power with their students.

Using RYDM Data and Listening to Students: Off of the Shelf and into the School

Bonnie Benard and her colleague, Carol Burgoa, were charged by the California Department of Education with the task of helping schools and districts across California to *use* their California Healthy Kids Survey's RYDM data. It became apparent that giving schools, their districts and community organizations lists of strategies they could use to promote caring, for example, would become just another burdensome “to-do” list for already overworked and over-committed teachers, schools, and youth workers.

In viewing the video “Student-Led Focus Groups” in the Laboratory Network Project's *Listening to Student Voices Toolkit* (2001), Benard and Burgoa realized that ultimately, the only effective approach to improving schools' and communities' provision of these protective factors was to ask the youth themselves how *they* knew if an adult at school or in their community cared about them and believed in them, as well as what opportunities they had for meaningful participation (e.g., make decisions and to do things that made a difference in their school and community). The action-oriented Listening to Students Circle was developed by Benard and Burgoa, building on the strategies in the toolkit. The circle strategies were honed over time based on the experiences gained.

The Student Circle uses a “fishbowl” structure in which school staff and other concerned community partners sit in a larger circle around an inner circle of students. Both groups have agreements (see Figure 26.3) they commit to honoring during this strengths-based listening process (adapted from Appreciative Inquiry-grounded Listening Process; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999).

In the Listening to Students Circle, the reversal of formal roles, in which students speak and school staff listen, makes a strong impression on youth and adults alike. Both students and school staff learn what young people really think. All participants are motivated to work in partnership to develop strategies for change in the planning process that follows the circle. The benefits for students, adults, and the community of this process include the following:
Students...

1. experience a process that embodies the protective factors of caring relationships, high expectations, and meaningful participation;

<i>Students agree to:</i>	<i>Adults agree to:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Turn off cell phones ➤ Focus on what you do like, want, and need ➤ Only use names for positive comments ➤ Be respectful of each other ➤ Speak on at a time ➤ Remember time limitations ➤ Speak your truth! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Turn off cell phones ➤ Stay for the entire focus group ➤ Be silent during focus group ➤ Keep the comments offered by students anonymous (except for mandatory reporting) ➤ Commit to a plan of action that reflects the students' perspectives

Figure 26.3 Listening to students circle agreements.

2. contribute to policy and program changes based on their needs, experiences, and interests;
3. learn that young people from different backgrounds have very similar perspectives on important questions; and
4. develop greater respect for similarities and differences across different groups, cliques, and even gangs.

Adults...

1. learn young people understand a great deal about how their school and community operates and that they value adults who genuinely want to help them;
2. appreciate knowing the “little things” that are within their power to do to make a difference in the lives of youth; and
3. develop an understanding of resilience and youth development and a remembering of why they became teachers or other adults in service to young people.

The school community...

1. experiences a strengthening of adult-/staff-youth relationships;
2. generates action plans and activities that youth feel make a difference and that they have ownership in; and
3. increases protective factors positively associated with students' decreased health-risk behaviors and improved student performance.

The evaluations and feedback from both youth and adult participants have been uniformly positive concerning the more than 100 Circles conducted. In evaluating the Circle, students often state that they feel like they were provided the very assets they were asked about: caring relationships, high expectation messages, and opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution. When the Listening to Students Circles have been done as a research tool to shed light on CHKS/RYDM findings, the workshop evaluations consistently find that most of the participants are committed to using this process back in their own schools and districts and to taking on the responsibility of following up on the recommendations generated by the students.

What Students Tell Us: Tapping the Wisdom Within

So what do students tell us in these Circles? The following summary of Circle focus group responses was assembled from 25 focus groups conducted across California from 2003 through 2006. Students were randomly selected and were not necessarily leaders in their schools or communities. In fact, groups were assembled to elicit a range of responses across the student body with outreach especially to students in alternative schools. Although each circle evolved in its own way, every Circle also had a common core set of discussion questions, which are summarized in the next section. Overall, the student responses were simple, realistic, altruistic, and quite profound.

Caring Relationships “Get To Know Our Stories”

To the question, “How do you know a teacher or other adult in your school cares about you?” students overwhelmingly responded that the facial expressions and simple actions that a teacher makes convince them that the staff member cares about them. Words helped but actions won out. It was less about praising the students and more about treating the students as friends and knowing about them outside the confines of the classroom: “When I’m bothered, they help me by listening and encouraging me ... they talk to me as a person and friend—not just as a student.”

Essentially, students highlighted simple acts as ways they knew their teachers cared. They identified actions that take place in many classrooms across the state and nation everyday—actions that should take place in every classroom everyday. These include acting friendly, smiling, saying hello (especially outside of class), taking an interest in the student, and noticing when the student was troubled. Students advise teachers to do the following:

1. Develop friendships with students, and ask, “How was your weekend?”
2. Listen and give eye contact.
3. Greet us and ask, “How are you doing?”
4. Take time to say hello.
5. Know our names.
6. Get to know our stories.

Many students also described how their teacher “pushed” them in their schoolwork and that the students understood that by doing this they cared about both the student and what the student is achieving and can achieve: “They push me to do better—they have side conversations with you, pull you aside and listen...they nag me toward my goals and help me reach them.”

High Expectations “See You In The Future”

Personal interactions also scored high in response to the question, “How do you know when an adult believes in you?” The difference here was that words mattered as much as actions:

1. They say, “I believe in you”; it’s as simple as that..
2. They say, “You can succeed in life.”
3. They brag about you.
4. Encouragement is key; they say, “You can do better.”
5. They see you after class and say, “See you in the future.”

Actions, however, were still considered important, and one can hypothesize that they give meaning and emphasis to the words and encouragement. The actions that were highlighted by the

array of students once again included such simple acts as showing trust and respect—actions that students read, understood and interpreted as “belief” in them:

1. They give you the benefit of the doubt when you tell a story.
2. They will understand my stress and give me a chance.
3. When they give me a second chance on a test or paper, I know they believe in me.
4. They give me responsibilities, which shows confidence in me.

As with caring, a teacher who “pushes” students to do better, to excel, is frequently viewed as a teacher who “believes” in the students: “When they push me to try to do more and work hard. Like in band last year, Mr. K. saw my potential and encouraged me ... when they give you challenging work, indicating they want you to go further.”

However, several students also pointed out that a teacher who pushes them unreasonably or without an underlying sense of caring or trust will not be seen as believing in them but rather as “picking” on them: “They give you some slack, like help you to calm down so you can focus on learning ... They’re not on me, asking me why I didn’t do something or holding me to the fire.”

As with many of these supports, the line between caring and believing is often blurred. Teachers who care want them to succeed and teachers who believe trust that they will succeed: “They understand me and trust me and believe I will be successful ... Caring and believing go together; if you care about someone, you believe in them.”

Opportunities for Meaningful Participation “Hands On Learning ... Make Learning Fun”

Although the previous two questions were the refreshing and clarifying, the responses to the question—“What would make school more fun and interesting for you and your friends?”—were probably the most intriguing. Student responses mapped well to what research says are effective pedagogical approaches associated with student success: *small learning groups, group work, project-based learning, mentoring, peer interactivity, smaller classes, hands on work, learning games, field trips to colleges, inter-curricula projects, career electives, and learning through discussion*. These were all phrases mentioned by students that appear in many current research articles (Daggett, 2004; Huebner et al., 2006; Walcott, Owens-West, & Makkonen, 2005; National High School Alliance, 2005; Lambert, Lowry, Copland, Gallucci, & Wallach, 2004).

In a recent WestEd-Gates Foundation collaboration, *Rethinking High School* (Huebner et al., 2004), all of these approaches were cited as examples of effective strategies for engaging students and producing positive educational outcomes. The publication’s finding that a key premise of effective schools is “strong interpersonal (i.e., supportive/nurturing) relationships between students and staff” (p. 8) is not surprising to practitioners of a resiliency approach.

The responses by students in the Circle focus groups highlighted several common areas that would make learning “fun” and more enjoyable, which included the following:

1. A variety of classroom activities—Students stated that classes that taught them in different ways, with a variety of activities and forums were interesting:
 - In class don’t just do bookwork but do activities. Active learning, and more discussions. Make it more visual. Show me how to do it.
 - We do “Tea & Talk” with English teachers outside of class. Science is also really fun; we do Science nights with a telescope.
2. Group-work—Group-work, pair-work, and group project-based learning were all suggestions elicited by a vast number of students. These cooperative learning approaches allow students

to interact, assist each other, pool resources, and as one student noted “improve our social skills”:

- Get the fun into class! Do group projects. Work in groups—we can share ideas and opens you up to new ones.
 - Work in groups—we’re in cubbyholes that feel like a “juvenile” hall or prison cell.
3. Hands-on activities. Activities where students get to manipulate, learn through action, and create something were also highlighted as “fun and enjoyable” ways of learning.

If we combine the responses from all the above—interesting class activities, group-work, and hands-on activities—they were by far the most prevalent response overall (22%).

“Kids Choose”

In responding to the question, “What kinds of decisions do you make or would you like to make in your classrooms and about your school,” students mentioned many aspects of school life. However, overall they just wanted “choice.” They wanted to have a voice and choice in many and various areas that ranged from subject choice, to uniforms, to food available, and timetabling. Essentially, all issues matter but having the power to choose is what appears to matter most. Students are clearly in need of choice, control and some degree of ownership in their schools. Given that the development of psychological autonomy is a major developmental task as well as critical resilience strength, it becomes imperative that schools, as a major arena for young people’s development, provide them this opportunity.

Several broad categories did emerge from the variety of student responses to this issue. These arenas provide an insight into areas that can easily incorporate more student involvement and ownership, which include the following:

1. School lunches (times, type of food available)—We have a closed campus to be safe but that forces us to eat the food here, which is going to kill us.
2. Class rules—I would want to have input in school rules. I would like the administration to ask our opinions.
3. Homework (amount and schedules)—Teachers should coordinate the amount of homework and days for tests.
4. Restroom issues (accessibility and condition)—No escorts to the bathroom and have a clean school and restrooms.

“Kids Helping Kids”

Subsequently the students in the circle are asked how they can make a difference, “What kinds of things could you do at school and in your community that would help others? Improve your school or community?” The responses to these questions were the most affirming. Students exude a high level of altruism and a desire to help their fellow peers, their schools and their community.

1. *Peer helping.* Overwhelmingly (42% of responses), students were eager to help other students—be they new, younger, older, same-age, dealing with issues or just in need of tutoring:
 - I’d like to help start a sports club or be a coach for younger kids.
 - I want to help tutor little kids in reading and math after school.
 - I’m bilingual and I could go into both English and Spanish classes and help.

2. *Community service.* Many also mentioned that they would like to volunteer at a senior citizen center in their community:
 - I'm volunteering at the Helping Hands retirement home. I like to do this because it makes us feel we're making progress and it improves our community...I'd like to help elderly people in our community.
 - Other community suggestions included but were not limited to, such activities as charity work, volunteering at day care center/ animal shelters, and hurricane and other disaster fundraising.
3. School beautification. Many also highlighted they'd like to help clean, beautify, and decorate the school:
 - I could put soap in restrooms.
 - We should have a one-day cleanup so students would understand how much work we make for janitors.

Overall the suggestions were engaging, empowering and altruistic—and most were do-able. They also reflected the deep need our young people have for community in their schools and their willingness to work to make this happen:

1. School is a community; it's not a building but about people.
2. We need to change our attitude towards our community—it's so much easier to be negative than positive ... we need to come together as people, not roles.

Summing Up: "Be There" and "Guide Us"

The final content question asked, "Is there anything else you need from the adults in your school to help you achieve your goals and dreams?" There were two general responses to this question across the board. One was an action, the other an activity.

Not surprisingly the action that adults can do is to "be there." Being there was the underlying theme that echoed throughout all the Circle focus groups and all series of questions. Be there when students need help, be there when they need structure, be there when they need advice, be there when they need to be pushed, be there when they need guidance, be there when they need more space and time, and be there when something's wrong and they don't know what to do. "Being there" encapsulates a relationship, a friendship—someone who knows your name and knows "your story." It encompasses caring, and believing you will succeed. In its most simple form it consists of physically "being there"—being present and making time.

1. We need understanding. Be there for us; you're our second parents.
2. Be there for us and believe in us so we can count on you.
3. I need an adult to believe in me.

The second response theme was an activity and something that students believe is essential in order to reach their dreams—advice on career and college. Just under half of all respondents cited their need for guidance toward a career or college—courses required, scholarships, job shadowing, internships, and knowledge about careers that would work for them:

1. I would like to discuss my strengths and what careers match them.
2. I need to know more about college and what classes I need to take.
3. We need people that are experts in a variety of fields who can help us with prerequisites so we can do things right.

Connectedness in Action: “I Think Our Voices Counted Today”

The results of these listening circles clearly demonstrate that students are hungry to have teachers and other adults in their schools that will help connect them to each other as well as to a bright future. Using the RYDM data as a catalyst, this listening process provides further first-hand contextualized information on what is needed and what can be done to improve local schools for local students. Furthermore, this process serves as a resilience-based intervention that helps build this connectedness, trust, and these relationships among students using a youth development empowerment practice that puts the students front and center. The students’ responses to the question “How was it to participate in the group?” illustrate this point:

1. Shows us that adults do care about us.
2. I liked the fact that we got to teach the teachers!
3. I think our voices counted today.
4. School can be a prison, but it can also be like therapy.
5. I am sad often and hide my feelings, but I love it when teachers ask how I’m doing or what’s going on.

When we asked the teachers and other adult staff how they experienced this process, their comments reflect the power of this listening approach to effect their positive beliefs in their students, to either move their paradigms from a deficit to a strengths perspective or to validate the strengths perspective they already have:

1. I had forgotten how smart our students really are—and that sometimes all they need is to have us listen.
2. It was very powerful for our staff to hear the kids say “don’t give up on me” and to “push me to do my best.”
3. At the continuation school, many of our students have a hard time demonstrating the fact that they have brilliant minds. In this process they weren’t afraid to show their intelligence and strength, vulnerability and resilience.

Putting It into Practice

After processing the student and adult listening circle reflections, the students pull their chairs from the inner circle into the larger circle of adults—a movement both physical and symbolic—for a dialog and an action-planning process we call “youth development partnership planning.” During this time, the students and their teachers and other school staff plan together for changes they can make together in their school that are based on the students’ recommendations in the listening circle. Adult follow-up on the students’ suggestions is imperative, otherwise, this intervention risks becoming yet another instance of adults failing students and consequently further disconnecting and de-motivating them. Such imperative is the reason adult follow-up is one of the Listening to Students Circle Agreements (see Figure 25.3).

The following are three examples of how school staff have used their student data (the RYDM and the Circle focus groups) to make changes to their settings. Though each setting was different and each had its own set of strengths and issues, the general themes from students and the reactions from staff were similar. Student comments and adult reactions were consistently about developing more caring relationships and providing more meaningful participation. Some of the suggested changes were small and could be implemented immediately; others would take more time, planning and, of course, student input. The main purpose of highlighting these cases is to show that little steps are simple, quite possible, very necessary, and meaningful to students.

Laytonville High School

In May of 2006, Benard and Burgoa hosted a Listening Circle at Laytonville (Mendocino County, California) with the help of the Prevention and After School Programs Coordinator for Mendocino County Office of Education. Issues that arose through the Circle included lack of student empowerment, frustration at decisions being made by adults, and a general feeling that student voices were not being heard.

The Principal at the high school was present at this event and the following day began to put three of the Circle's suggestions into effect.

1. Students said they often have multiple tests scheduled on the same day or large assignments from various classes due at the same time. This caused confusion and long hours of work. Students mentioned that teachers should talk to each other and stagger the homework/testing days. A staggered schedule was developed the following week.
2. Students also discussed the lack of greenery around their school and indicated that they wanted to be part of the beautifying process. A staff-student landscaping committee was formed which has already changed the physical appearance of the school.
3. Several students also noted that if any of them wished to see the school counselor they had to enter via the Administration office in full view of the Principal, Assistant Principal, and often, other students. They requested that an alternate door be provided at the rear of the office so their anonymity can be maintained. This solution was quickly implemented.

A year later, the principal reported the following:

The students were very positive about all the changes we made ... They were especially enthusiastic about the landscaping, so much so that a Landscape Club has been started by one of the students themselves and it continues to this day ... The attitude of the students in general and the interactions with the staff have been great ... However, we know that to maintain these positive feelings, we have to keep doing things and making things better for our students. (May 9, 2007)

These positive changes were also reflected in Laytonville's RYDM data from the 2006–07 school year. Increases in Caring Relationships, High Expectations, and Meaningful Participation were reported for both grades 9 and 11. Especially significant were the grade 11 scores with Caring Relationships (from 18% to 60%) and High Expectations (29% to 53%), and Meaningful Participation (16% to 32%) doubling or even tripling.

Partners in Health and Safety

At the beginning of 2007, the Butte County (California) Office of Education's Partners in Health and Safety conducted an in-service with district schools to look over their RYDM and prior Circle focus group data. This student data were also compared to that from staff that had completed the School Climate Survey (SCS)—a California Department of Education staff survey of school connectedness completed at the same time as the CHKS/RYDM.

Issues that arose from the staff SCS and the discussion were not atypical of a high school district and included student issues such as lack of respect, pride, and/or ownership of the school; appropriate communication skills; issues of violence; and lack of academic motivation goals and skills. Staff also commented that there was a general lack of unity and cohesion among staff members and a general lack of support for teachers from other teachers.

What emerged from the in-service was a list of steps, some simple and some complex, that the staff could take and work towards. In general, the ideas aimed for ways to meet the identified needs of the students and to connect, reconnect, and engage the students in the daily life of the school. The steps included changing the school paint color, involving the students in renovation/landscaping projects, adding permanent tables and benches, developing school-wide projects, reinstating advisory/home room periods, and allowing students to provide the morning announcements.

The staff also came to the realization that moving forward with an agenda to reconnect and re-empower students required them to first focus on reconnecting themselves. This is a critical but often overlooked point: If one wishes to improve school connectedness, one needs to take into consideration all partners in the school—students, staff, administration, parents, and the community. The Butte facilitator noted that she was “amazed at the direction the staff went in terms of their focus on the need to be more positively connected with themselves before they could be more positive with students. I was touched by the staff comments about how staff used to do things to connect more and were sad that those opportunities were now missing.”

Since this in-service took place in early 2007, some proposals have been acted upon, some are being planned, and others are still under discussion. An immediate result was that teachers started talking to students more when they entered classes, staff expanded and made more visible the student positive recognition program, teachers made a greater effort to be out on campus, and staff are following through in their desire to become a more connected faculty, the crucial step in reconnecting the students.

San Gabriel High School and the Alhambra City High School District

In October 2004, the Alhambra City High School District (Los Angeles County, California) used both the RYDM data and the Circle focus group as the vehicles to look at increasing student connectedness in San Gabriel High School. Discussions with both staff and students were framed from a strengths perspective; that is, according to the District’s Instruction Specialist “talking about what’s right.”

What surfaced was a series of student-led programs and projects to enhance the relationships between students and staff, and students and their school. These included:

1. *Culture Club*—a twice-monthly staff-student club that looks at the ethos or culture of the school and aims to highlight what is positive about the school culturally.
2. *Mentors*—the school also established a student-adult mentoring program where students were able to choose their mentor. This effort included not just staff but all custodian, food services, and auxiliary personnel. It not only provided the student with a mentor with whom they had a connection, but it intentionally engaged many of the non-teaching staff in roles they had not previously formally experienced at their school. To these adults it was an especially empowering, complimentary, and inclusive experience.
3. *Bathroom Project*—this is a student-led and organized project in which students take ownership of the bathrooms assisting janitorial staff in maintaining their condition, appearance, and accessibility.
4. *Eye Project*—a student project spawned from the Culture Club that highlighted the diversity of the school population—staff and students. The project combined photographs of staff and students’ eyes with quotes expressing their desires and goals.
5. *Positive Quotes*—positive quotes in hallways and on walls decorate the school.

The impact of intentionally focusing on and creating caring relationships and the use of data to

drive this has not only been adopted by San Gabriel High School but has been a key focus of the Alhambra City High School District and their District Superintendent. Schools across the district have made a concerted effort to increase student connectedness by building caring relationships between staff and students. Over the last few years district schools have not only seen a reduction in the student dropout rate but, over the last 4 years, have seen several schools exceed their Academic Performance Index growth targets (a school-level comparative measure for California's high-stakes test).

Conclusion

Resilience research has established that *listening* is a simple but powerful “turnaround” practice that adults can do in families, schools, programs, and communities to support and empower young people. Attentive listening incorporates all three protective factors—caring for, believing in, and inviting the participation and contribution of the one listened to. Moreover, the categories of resilience strengths mentioned earlier in this chapter (social competence, problem solving, autonomy/identity, and sense of purpose and future)—as well as others discussed in this book—are engaged and nurtured in the one listened to.

A small but growing number of educational researchers have also turned their attention to the subject of listening to students. Poplin and her colleagues' seminal study, *Voices from the Inside* (Bane, 1992), found that the act of adults listening to students in focus groups was actually transformative in motivating and connecting the students to their schools and in actually improving the climate for learning. Sonya Nieto's research on successful students from a wide variety of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and social-class backgrounds identified listening to students as the key strategy for educational change, one which is too often ignored: “Student perspectives are for the most part missing in discussions concerning strategies for confronting education problems. In addition, the voices of students are rarely heard in the debates about school failure and success, and the perspectives of students from disempowered and dominated communities are even more invisible” (Nieto, 1994, p. 396). Fullan, one of the leading writers on school change, has also argued for the student perspective:

Educational change, above all, is a people-related phenomenon for each and every individual. Students, even little ones, are people too. Unless they have some meaningful (to them) role in the enterprise, most educational change, indeed most education, will fail. I ask the reader not to think of students as running the school, but to entertain the following question: What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of reform in schools? (Fullan, 1991, p. 170)

More recently, Fine and her colleagues at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York see student voice and choice as an essential path for closing the achievement gap and reducing dropout rates (Black, 2006). They are proponents of “participatory action research with students” as a strategy for creating meaningful student participation and contribution in their schools in New York City and other urban communities.

Cook-Sather, a leader in the emerging field of researching students' perspectives on education, argued that giving students greater voice and agency in their own educational processes is essential if schooling is to be meaningful and effective (2002). Cook-Sather's conclusion that the twin challenges to “authorizing student perspective” are changing the minds of adults and changing the structure of schools parallel our own. Specifically, we see these challenges as educators' deficit beliefs about students' capacities and the deficit-based national education policy context that

denies both students and teachers a voice in the power structure by the imposition of top-down “evidence-based programs,” standardized curricula, and high-stakes testing.

The Role of Positive (School) Psychologists

We suggest that positive psychologists working in and with schools can play a significant role in addressing these two challenges. School psychologists are in a unique position to educate their school communities in resilience and school connectedness research and youth development practice and to serve both students and teachers by creating the opportunities for listening, dialogue, and partnership. Facilitating a Listening to Students Circle Process such as the one described in this chapter provides one way school psychologists can help to create a safe place for students to be listened to and heard, for both students and their teachers to talk, and for teachers and other school staff to change power structures by actually working in partnership with their students.

In the absence of state-wide resilience or youth development surveys and assessments, school psychologists can gather local school data by working in partnership with students themselves, using a participatory action research process such as that described in the Laboratory Network Project's *Listening to Student Voices Toolkit* (2001). Following up the student circle by facilitating a listening to *staff* circle process would go even farther in helping to change beliefs and address power dynamics. If a recent greeting card is right, “What everyone needs is a good listening to!”

In doing this work, positive psychologists are joining a growing national and international movement towards a more strengths-based, human, responsive, whole child-centered educational policy that embraces the voices of young people. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child—signed by every country except the United States and Somalia—states that children and young people have a right to be informed about, involved in, and consulted about all activities that impact their lives (www.unicef.org/crc). It is our hope that positive psychologists working in schools will use this intentional listening process as a catalyst for incorporating listening, dialog, and partnership on an ongoing basis for all their students and staff. Ultimately, it is only when the people in schools themselves work together in community to meet the developmental needs of students and staff that schools will change and disparity of wellbeing (as well as the achievement gap) will close. It is not hard to do and the effects are simultaneously empowering and powerful. All that needs to be done is to stop, take a step back, and listen.

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