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Engaging High School Students in a Context of Turbulence:
Implications for Catholic School Leaders

Steven Jay Gross
Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Temple University

Charles Burford
Associate Professor of Educational Leadership
Australian Catholic University

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Abstract : Engaging High School Students in a Context of Turbulence: Implications For Catholic Leaders

While scores of programs are designed to respond to the concerns of teachers and administrators, sparse attention has been paid to students themselves. How do they define their learning needs? Where are these needs met now? How do today's high school students learn best? We simply have not bothered to ask these essential questions often enough and well enough. Without answers to such fundamental questions, how do policy makers know that young people are listening, let alone engaged enough to learn effectively? If we are serious about promoting high standards of academic achievement, we must do more than talk. This paper will report on research conducted by the authors in The United States and Australia designed to give a carefully selected, diverse group of high school students an opportunity to describe their level of engagement with school academic programs and express their own learning priorities. Five Australian Catholic High schools were selected for participation in this study. Their selection was decided by their existing involvement in a Project called "Leaders Transforming Learning and Learners". To further the LTLL program goals it was decided to incorporate a research project commenced by Prof Steven Gross of Temple University, Pennsylvania on Student Engagement into the "Leaders Transforming Learning and Learners" program. It was hoped to give insights to the school's leadership teams and their student and parent communities about the perceptions of their students, as to their engagement in learning at the school, at the outset of the LTLL program. The research problem statement was: What learning really matters to today's high school students and how do we know?. This paper will share what the findings that have clear implications for leaders in Catholic Schools

Introduction

Concern over lack of student engagement at the high school level in the US and Australia has been consistent over the past decade (Marks 2000, Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992, Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996, OECD 2003). These studies show that between 25-60% of US high school students express feelings of disengagement from their schools. Thus, practitioners, policy makers and researchers face a dilemma: On the one hand, there is increased demand for accountability and visible results of student achievement. On the other hand, since the accountability movement has been designed and implemented with little student in-put, what confidence can anyone have that such tools as high stakes testing will decrease the already high levels of high school student disengagement? Clearly, there is a need to infuse the discussion with the perspective of high school students themselves. Because this is an international problem (OECD 2003), data were gathered from the US and Australian Catholic high school students. Significantly, both nations are experiencing similar problems of high school student disengagement and increased mandatory high stakes testing. The goal of this research is to give a carefully selected, diverse group of high school students from both countries an opportunity to describe their level of engagement with school academic programs and express their own learning priorities.

Theoretical Framework:

Turbulence Theory (Gross 1998, Gross and Shapiro 2003, Gross 2004) shows that organizations, and the individuals that comprise them, are constantly required to face various levels of disruption, tension, and dynamic movement ranging from light to extreme turbulence. Current demands upon all US public schools, in the form of No

Child Left Behind and high stakes testing, force increased turbulence on local school leaders who teach and test specific content on the one hand and must engage students if they are to be effective, on the other hand. The same conditions exist for high school leaders and students in Australia, in public and non-public schools since all schools in Australia receive significant governmental funding and are required to follow their relevant state's curriculum regulations and accountability requirements. The Australian schools are also experiencing increasing pressure to account at the federal government level (Burford 2004). Indeed the current education debate leading up to the next Federal election appears to be what kind of National Curriculum we will have, with the only point of conjecture being how to get the States to comply. Students may also experience increased levels of turbulence, especially if they are alienated from the school's curriculum, instruction and assessment practices. In the case of potential drop-outs, this level of turbulence may be sufficient to cause a final rupture with their school and a premature end of their formal education. Since high school students' perspectives have not been a core element in designing the current accountability movement, a reasonable first step to attend to students' turbulence, vis a vis their schools, is to seek their opinions on their own learning priorities and the extent to which they believe these priorities are attended to in their school experience.

Research Questions:

1. How do selected high school students define their learning priorities and to what extent do they see these priorities attended to in high school classes?
2. How do selected high school students describe peak learning experiences (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff 2003) and how frequently do they experience these in high school?
3. How do selected high school students depict their teenage life today and to what extent do they feel adults in their life share and empathize with that perspective?

Method

Students participated in a three-stage data gathering protocol that included qualitative and quantitative data collection:

Stage One: Student Forum: High school students worked in small groups (6-8 students per group) led by specially trained facilitators. Questions for forums included:
What do people need to know and be able to do to be successful these days?
What programs in or outside of school are helping you to learn what you feel you need to learn?

Stage Two: Small Group Interviews: High school students formed small groups (5-10 students per group) to respond to these three questions. Because interviewers probed initial responses, this was a semi-structured protocol:
Students and their world: What about being a teenager today would you like adults to understand and value? .

Students and their school: To what extent do you feel understood as an individual at school? How connected do you feel to your school?

Students as learners: Think of a time when you really enjoyed learning that you would like to share

Stage Three: Student Survey. A fifty-three item likert scale survey (High School Student Opinion Survey) was given to all participating high school students. This instrument included demographic information and included questions pertaining to Attitudes toward Curriculum (the learning agenda), Attitudes toward Instruction (how the learning agenda is shared between teachers and students) Attitudes toward Assessment (how students show development on the learning agenda) Attitudes toward learning and school achievement Attitudes toward teacher-student relations Attitudes toward engagement its relationship to school success

Triangulation of data was achieved in three ways: first by employing three different data collection strategies, through the use of multiple sites in each of the two countries and through comparison/contrasts between the US and Australia.

Note: The current status report of this study includes student reactions to three questions posed during small group interviews in Australia and the United States. Subsequent reports will include findings and analysis from student forums and surveys from both nations.

Data analysis included:

The researchers attempted early coding of the data by what they thought were the most useful themes (Glaser and Straus 1967). The authors suggest that these were useful themes because they held up to repeated scrutiny after many readings. Initial categories were created among emerging themes. In some cases, these held up after repeated examination. In other cases, new themes were created that more clearly related to the developing picture.

Each researcher worked independently at first (Burford in Australia and Gross in the US) examining interview data from his country. This was done in order to see if similar patterns and formal themes would develop. As the report below indicates, this was often the case. This iteration of their work is a third level of analysis, seeking to report the combined picture of high school students from Australia and the US. In this way they were able to make sure that there was coherence and good fit among the themes (Glesne and Peshkin 1992). Survey data were analyzed with JMP software to identify quantitative patterns. Comparisons between qualitative and quantitative findings were then drawn.

Data Sources: Ten high schools in the US and Australia were selected for participation in this study. US students were from public schools and Australian students were from Catholic schools in the state of New South Wales. It is important to note that Catholic schools in Australia, unlike those in the US, receive government funding and are subject to government accountability programs. Selection criteria included diversity in: setting, size of school, race, SES, graduation rates, geographic region, and national origin of students. Number of students from all schools in the study= 250. Students participating in this study were selected to represent a cross section of their school's population.

Findings: Comparison of interview responses between Australia and the US:
 Question 1: What would you like adults to understand about being a teenager today that you feel they do not understand?

US Responses:	Australian Responses:
Being a teenager is a special time	The importance of allowing us to experience this unique time. The only way we can develop. Acknowledge teen's right to live their own lives w/ independence and responsibility
Respect is crucial. Two way street. Listen to teens. Adults can't see our world as we do. Being a teen today is not the same as it was in our parent's time.	Respect the differences in life worlds. Times have changed, more opportunities now along with more complexity. Less linear than parents' lives (childhood-school-work). Don't try to relive your life through your children.
Let us make and learn from our own mistakes	Show compassion/respect and trust in this transition. Allow us to experience this unique time. Realistic discussions of hot issues (drugs/sex)
This is a stressful time. We live in a more complex era. Adults need to acknowledge this. Family life/roles & responsibilities have changed. Lots of time pressure for teens. There are multiple dimensions (family, friends, work, school)	Pressure of career, exams and need for social life. Family-school-work pressures. Different career goals than parents' goals for us. Parents view their own lives as harder than their children and so expect more of their children.

Question 2: How connected to your school do you feel and why?

US Responses	Australian Responses
Reasons associated with feelings of connection to schools:	Reasons associated with feelings of connection to schools:
Schools provide some freedom to manage parts of our lives	Need for community identity and acknowledgement. A need to be known and valued.
Once we became 11 th and 12 th graders, teachers treatment of us changed from being controlling to support and more equality	Being in 11 th and 12 th grades, teachers started to treat us in a more equal way.
We are treated with respect, especially in a personal crisis	When teachers showed mutual respect for us.
Early intervention by counselors and teachers when we need academic help in courses such as math.	Teachers can be major connectors. Their enthusiasm really matters and timely help in academic areas is crucial.
Reasons associated with feelings of disconnection to schools:	Reasons associated with feelings of disconnection to schools:
Being labeled or mislabeled as areas such as special education	Exams, competition, choice and life skills. High stakes tests not measuring student valued content. "Test and forget."
Conflicts with administration such as unequal treatment between well known and valued students and those anonymous	Group dominance and stereotyping. Unequal treatment of students depending on their group (academic/non-academic)

students. Disconnect between school board and students. Insensitivity to students when they are in a crisis.	and culture. Non-out going students getting less support in school. School uniforms hiding or masking deeper differences. Seen as acceptable to some, superficial by others.
Issues with teachers. Not understanding challenges of home/work/school. Being in the anonymous middle. Stereotyping students as good or bad by virtue of one incident. Class inequalities between students and teachers.	Controlling cultures. School preventing individuality to emerge through uniform rules and dress codes (as in jewelry codes). Overly-enforced rules that undermine connection.
Students accept a responsibility for establishing a connection	

Question 3: Describe a time, in or outside of school, when you were really excited about learning.

US Responses:	Australian Responses:
Learning modalities associated with peak experiences	Learning modalities associated with peak experiences
Hands-on learning (experiential learning), Field trips, travel abroad. Including social justice, community service work.	Experiential learning makes it relevant. Field trips, , hands-on learning building relevance to hot issues of the day (ex: current global issue).
Interactive learning. Interdisciplinary learning (ex: learning history through music) engaging dialogues in class	Inter-disciplinary
Personalized learning. Small class size, individual work with teachers (avoids students as anonymous. Independent learning exploring the dreams by oneself.	Extra curricular and informal education. Field trips, retreats, small groups working closely with teachers. Engaging in social justice and community service.
Teaching approaches associated with peak experiences	Teaching approaches associated with peak experiences
Coaching teachers-might literally be a coach, coaching-pushing, challenging and supporting, individual attention- knowing students, keeping students 'in the game'. ZPD-scaffolding-knowing when to back away & control of when to/when not to assess.	Individualize the classroom
Intensity	Teacher passion & knowledge excites learners. Clear love of subject infects students and personalizes learning.
On our level, no condescension to students. Respect for students, careful support to risk-taking during learning. Sharing a new, practical skill with students.	Teacher relationships make it happen. On our level, careful listening dialogue, known to students personalized. No condescending- able to see the world through teenagers' eyes
	Issues inhibiting peak learning experiences:
	Boredom: Old methods vs New methods.

	Old methods- windy lectures, new methods careful dialogues-interactive discussions aimed @ involvement not passive reception. Teachers need to drop formal roles and treat students as adults.
	Career choice, independence and maturity. A desire for more choices than the current curriculum allowed (ex band, psychology)
	Finals, exams, entrance tests, scaling (test weighting) and alienation- hurts peak learning. Too rigid, 'rat race' exam pressures and competition.

Analysis

Responses from the interview questions raise several interesting themes discussed below.

A question of developmental psychology or ethics?

Beyond the words themselves is the intensity of the high school student responses in both countries. Frustration, anger, fatigue, angst, mixed with hope, sincerity, and confidence are evident along with a declared need to be understood. We may elect to use a developmental lens to interpret this (Erikson 1950) but we should realize that developmental psychology, like any metaphor, this has its inherent limits (Morgan 1997). Our background, education, and training readily lead us to say that this is exactly what the literature tells us to expect from people this age in advanced economies and that it is nothing new. This response is both professional (to us as educators and scholars) and at the same time, off-putting to teens because it maintains adult power relations, when the voices of students seems to insist on open dialogue and right to voice. This turns the question into one of ethics. Specifically; the ethic of care, critique (Starratt 1994), the profession (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2001, 2005), the community (Furman 2003, Gross and Shapiro 2004). By employing ethical lenses, we are able to question some of the basic assumptions that seem to trap our construction of high schools (literally and programmatically) into the same molds decade after decade.

Flow state versus the machine metaphor:

Learning as an emotional experience connected to a larger world and its issues was closely associated with peak experiences. There was a need to count and for learning to have meaning. Hands-on, experiential learning was a crucial ingredient for participants for students in both nations. While these experiences were deeply remembered and recalled with fondness, they were not frequently experienced by the students in the normal course of their learning. Humanized, personalized, non-officious teaching was valued. Teachers were appreciated most when they were authentic and known. Interactive, dialogic learning that personalized, supported and challenged students was frequently recalled. Community-building experiences were also recalled by students in both nations.

All of these patterns resonate with Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory (Shernoff, D.J., Csikszentmihalyi, M., Schneider, B., & Shernoff, E.S. 2003) and are at odds with hierarchical programs of accountability associated with Morgan's machine metaphor

(Morgan 1997). Indeed, Australian students repeatedly pointed out that their joy of learning seemed destined to wither in the face of 11th and 12th grade testing and preparation for Higher School Certificate examinations organized along the lines of scientific management¹. Authentic learning almost came to a halt in 11th grade, according to numerous Australian students, when the “rat race” began. (As an old colleague reflected, “Life is becoming a rat race and the rats are winning.”)

The relevance of Turbulence Theory: Positive nature of turbulence, cascading, positionality.

It is not surprising that these high school students demonstrated strong feelings when asked about their lives and their educational experiences. Turbulence Theory employs four levels of disturbance (modeled after those used in flight instruction) to describe its intensity: Light (where little or no disturbance is experienced), Moderate (where a constant or buffeting disturbance is experienced but where enough stability exists to continue), Severe (where disturbance is so elevated that stability is lost, at least for a brief period of time and where the flight is threatened), and Extreme (where disturbance is so significant that structural damage to the craft occurs). It is not hard to use these four levels when speaking about the lives of young people in high school. While a wide range of turbulence exists, it may be unrealistic to expect that so tumultuous a period of life as the teenage years can transpire without at least a moderate level of disturbance. In fact, there is a positive quality to turbulence that allows for change (Gryskiewicz 1999) and a freeing of one generation from its parents. However, severe and extreme levels of turbulence rightly cause deep concern not only for adults but for the thoughtful teenagers in this study.

Cascading (Shapiro and Gross in press) is a quality of turbulence where one volatile issue after another raises the level of disturbance simply because of their close proximity in time. In this way, a teacher’s indifference to a student who just lost a job and was in a minor car accident on the way to school is magnified to the level of outrage. Moderate turbulence may readily cascade into severe turbulence as a result. This relates to one further aspect of turbulence called positionality (Shapiro and Gross in press): Where one is in relation to the cause of turbulence may have a crucial impact on how that turbulence is experienced. For the teacher in this case just mentioned, there is only a student who had a bad night and a careless accident. But to the student, their whole world may seem to be crashing down.

Understanding Turbulence Theory, its levels, cascading and positionality could help school, community members, parents, and policy leaders consider the impact of their actions with greater empathy for the feelings and resultant reactions of high school students.

Engagement as an emerging democratic citizen with voice mattered:

In both nations, there is a strong emphasis on family issues in response to question one. Schoolwork does enter into the discussion but only at the margins (as one of many pressures that teens in this study are facing). Parents’ influence, values, expectations are more at forefront. This may give us some insight on the relative influence of school in the lives of these students, at least as they perceive it. Teens in both countries assert

¹ Unlike the US, Catholic schools in Australia receive funds from the government and are required to follow the testing practices of public schools.

their right to space. On one hand this is a perennial theme. On the other, it represents a perennial dilemma between generations. We may wonder how or whether this can be diminished. This means that families represent a crucial dimension in creating a democratic learning community.

Students were also clearly aware of relationships at school and how different individuals from various social groups were treated. Of particular note is the importance that Australian and the US counterparts placed upon more egalitarian relationships with authority figures and an appreciation of being treated as an emerging adult population. It is not too strong to suggest that there was a growing intolerance for the reverse from school authorities mirroring the antipathy these teens felt when pigeon-holed by their families. Inequality at school was detected and strongly resented in both countries.²

As it relates to the issue of democracy, students did hold those in authority responsible for the kind of community that existed. In effect, these were citizens' reflections of their school as a microcosm of the larger society. Students at several sites remarked with some sadness that their opinions were rarely sought after.

Conclusion

Four Recommendations for Catholic Educational Leaders working for increased student engagement

1. Leaders would be wise to acknowledge the nature of turbulence as it effects high school students. Without question we are engaged in working with young people at a turbulent time in their lives. As suggested above, this turbulence need not be seen as only dangerous volatility, it can also a force for positive change and needed energy to launch an emerging adult into the wider world beyond home and school. However, alienation, anger, and frustration, can be the result of turbulence ignored. Disengagement from school and community can result in severe or extreme turbulence ending in enormous personal and social costs. The purpose of this study was to seek out and listen carefully to the reflections of teenagers as they discuss serious questions facing them.
2. Next, leaders at all levels need to understand the centrality of ethical decision making. While developmental knowledge of students in high school is an essential ingredient in understanding their strengths and challenges, it is insufficient. Students in this study made clear their need to be dealt with in an ethical manner. More specifically, their stories spoke to the need for multiple ethical lenses. Where the school and its rules represented an ethic of justice, students needed more. Concern for them as unique beings facing specific opportunities and challenges is demonstrated through an ethic of care. Likewise, an ethic of critique is evident in their anger over inequality at school demonstrated by claims of teacher favoritism. Students' insistence on fairness also speaks to the ethic of the community. Finally, the ethic of the profession requires all involved to consider what is in the best interest of the learner. At the very least, this means weighing all elements in the complex equation of high

² Where the US students saw teachers, principals, and even school boards as responsible for their feelings of connection or its reverse, Australian students focused mainly on the role that teachers played. One reason may be the difference in the two systems: the US sample all came from public high schools and the Australian students were in Catholic schools. This, however, is only speculation and does not account for the fact that administrative structures at the building level were very similar.

- school education in the post-modern world, especially the voices of students, when creating and implementing policy.
3. In educational policy and in the development of healthy communities, high school students in this study had specific ideas reflecting their own experiences that need to be heard. Attention to peak learning accounts in areas such as hands-on learning for instance is supported in learning theory such as the research on flow states. It is also elemental to a school culture that attempts to reflect the aspirations of its core constituency, the student body. Working with students in crafting a responsive instructional model that both challenges and supports their learning conforms to the findings of this study and to acknowledging students' right to voice in decisions that effect their learning and, therefore, their future.
 4. Constructing a viable and vibrant feedback system to learn from students, respond to concerns, and evaluate changing conditions seems consistent with the specific data coming from this study and its spirit. While students typically showed an appreciation for being asked the three research questions, the very novelty of this process demonstrated its exclusion from traditional school leadership practice. This is ironic in a world where schools are admonished to model themselves after successful businesses who would never dream of ignoring the tastes and values of their customers. More to the point of education in a society that aspires to social justice, ignoring student voice, either by design or neglect, is inconsistent with the democratic qualities too often spoken about but not lived in our high schools. If the first purpose of education in the US and Australia is the development and nurturance of the next generation of democratic citizens, our practice must emphasize, not silence student voice.

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