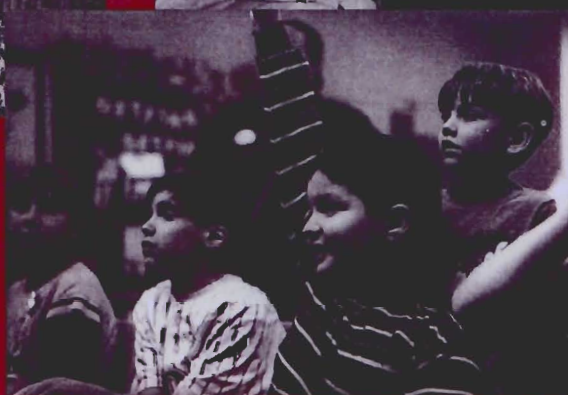
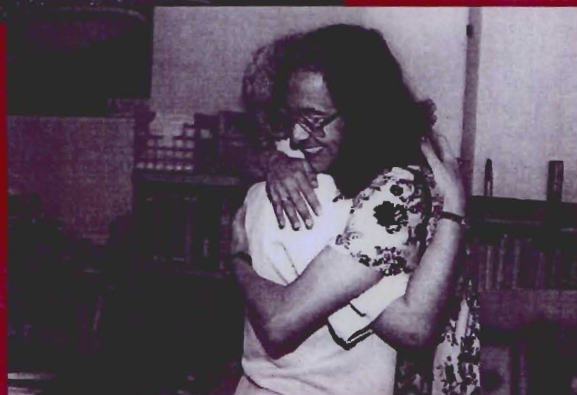
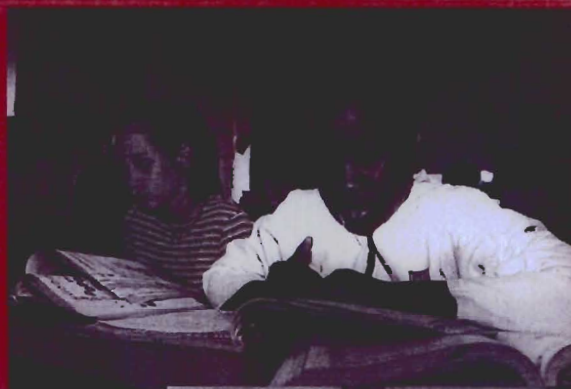
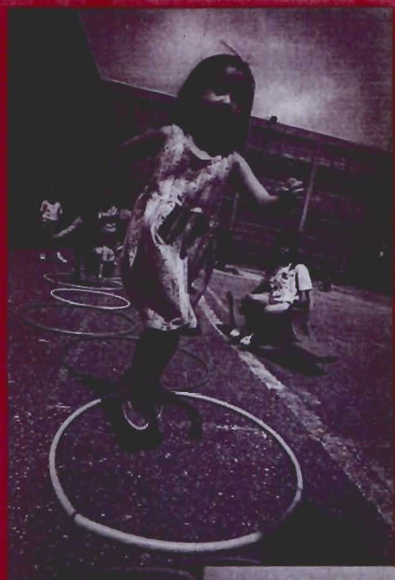


Focusing on Student Voices at AMY Northwest



TAKING STOCK / MAKING CHANGE

A Collaborative Action Research Project of the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education
and the School District of Philadelphia. Funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.



Focusing on Student Voices at AMY Northwest

by Gene Campher, Jody Cohen, Patricia DeBrady,
Lana Gold, Linnie Jones, Bonnie Mason, and Holly Perry

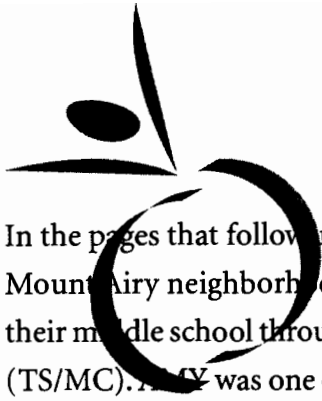
We are grateful to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for its generous support of Taking Stock/Making Change. Its commitment to funding school change projects over several years recognizes that there is no quick fix in educational reform. Fundamental change and enduring learning takes time and intensive effort.

Many thanks to Christina Hill Cantrill for her splendid design work for the TS/MC publication series. Her enthusiasm for the project and her fine organizational skills provided momentum and grounding. Thanks also to Rita Silver who edited the series with a thoughtful and subtle touch.

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INTRODUCTION

In the pages that follow, members of the AMY Northwest school community in the Mount Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia tell the story of their efforts to improve their middle school through a three year project called Taking Stock/Making Change (TS/MC). AMY was one of five schools in the School District to work with “friendly outsiders” from the Graduate School of Education’s Center for Urban Ethnography (CUE) at the University of Pennsylvania. In this public school/university partnership each school staff studied their school and used what they learned as a basis for reforms—a means of school change known as action research. Also participating in TS/MC were the Brown and Webster elementary schools, both in Kensington; the Bluford Elementary Science Magnet School in West Philadelphia; and the Levering School in Roxborough.

These schools were chosen to participate in TS/MC through an application process open to all schools involved in School Based Management/Shared Decision-Making, an initiative of the School District of Philadelphia that allows participating schools to make decisions at the local level, rather than having decisions made for them at the level of the central office. TS/MC called for a team of teachers, parents, and administrators from each of the five schools to perform school self-study, with the belief that continual stock-taking is an essential component of school-based change; schools must have the capacity to assess their decision-making and improvement efforts so that they can revise them.

In week-long summer institutes and Saturday retreats from 1993 to 1996, the five school teams worked with staff from CUE at Penn to learn ethnographic research methods such as one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews, participant observation, surveys, and analysis of school documents. In addition, CUE staff consulted with the teams throughout the year as they carried out their research, analyzed their data, planned reforms, and gathered further data about what was happening in their schools.

Taking stock means looking more carefully than usual to see what you have at the moment. Ethnography documents the daily life of people and their points of view on

what they are doing. Ethnographers have realized that most of the time people are so accustomed to their daily routines and so busy doing them that they don't pay much attention to what is going on. Everyday life becomes invisible in its living. There is an ethnographic proverb, "The fish would be the last to discover the existence of water." That is why taking stock is necessary.

People in schools need access to what often remains invisible to them, so that they can solve the significant, everyday problems that block school improvement. Ethnographic research methods are important tools for problem solving. While Philadelphia schools had, for some time, examined a variety of kinds of data about school outcomes like attendance rates, standardized test scores, and report card marks, they were unaccustomed to considering information gathered through reviewing documents, interviewing, and observation—the traditional research methods of ethnography. Answers to questions like "How do we teach reading in this school?" "What do staff understand about how decisions are made?" and "When do students feel successful?" remained part of what was invisible.

Taking Stock/Making Change began with the assumption that the problems schools face, especially urban schools, are so severe that the pressure to do *something* can lead to a "ready-fire-aim" approach to school reform—with deliberation and reflection after the reforms have been implemented, if at all. When this happens, reforms that have been conceived and mandated from above are often not fully "owned" by local school staff, and educators become increasingly cynical about the possibility of real change. The TS/MC process is an attempt to break this cycle of cynicism by making educational improvement more collective, deliberate, and data-based; less a matter of lip service, more a matter of actual commitment.

Taking Stock/Making Change Staff:

Fred Erickson, Center for Urban Ethnography

Jolley Bruce Christman, Research for Action

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FOCUSING ON STUDENT VOICES AT AMY NORTHWEST

by Gene Campher, Jody Cohen, Patricia DeBrady, Lana Gold,
Linnie Jones, Bonnie Mason, and Holly Perry

We often talk of school climate and school culture, but it's usually from the viewpoint of adults, the ones "in charge." Here we were daring to ask our consumers—current students—how they thought about what was happening with them and to them....What a novel idea, asking students what the school setting looked and felt like to them!

Gene Campher, Teacher

In the summer of 1993 a team from the Academy for the Middle Years (AMY-NW) attended the first Taking Stock/Making Change Summer Institute. This team, parents and school staff, female and male, African American and White, represented multiple perspectives from inside a school already deeply involved with reform. Early on, as participants sat around a table sharing perspectives on their school, it was evident that these differently positioned, strong-minded individuals each brought deeply held beliefs about youngsters and schooling.

A member of the Coalition of Essential Schools since 1988, AMY is a small school (250 students in grades 6-8) that offers teaching teams that develop theme-based curriculum and assessment for their students, narrative evaluations of student achievement, and Family Groups for guidance and community building. Staff and parents participate in site-based management and shared decision-making. AMY has as its stated mission the effort "to create a learning-centered community actively engaged in the adventure of quality learning and preparation for success in a changing, diverse world." The student body, integrated by a lottery process, is predominantly African American and White and drawn from neighborhoods throughout the city.

Here, where change was the norm, the AMY team undertook Taking Stock/Making Change (TS/MC) not to solve an identified problem but rather to document and reflect on changes already underway. How were reforms like narrative evaluations and



interdisciplinary learning actually working? At the first Summer Institute, the team framed questions they wanted to pursue: Are we doing what we say we're doing at AMY? How is AMY preparing our students for high school according to the outcomes stated in our Learning Plan? A parent encouraged seeking out students as informants: "The best way to find out [some answers] is to look at the kids, hear what they have to say." So the AMY team chose to solicit students' experiences in order to learn more about what was happening at their school.

Soliciting Students' Voices

I think we were like the guinea pigs of the classes, cause...[the teachers] kept experimenting on us, and, like, when we didn't do how they planned it, it felt like it was our fault. And they consistently told us that "we're gonna hold you back if you don't do what you're supposed to," but then they say "we're gonna pass you anyway." And now they just passed us—everybody who was in the 6th grade went to 7th and everybody in the 7th went to 8th. So now they're piling so much work on us, and we're not used to all this work. I'm not—it was so easy in 6th and 7th and now we got two projects due on the same day.

Monika, AMY student

Many of the adults and students who were part of this school community shared a feeling of ownership toward the school. Nonetheless, their assumptions and perspectives were at times so different that they seemed almost to occupy distinct realities within those spaces. For example, while adults were working to make changes that would improve the school, Monika's words (quoted above) suggested that what adults intended as school improvement sometimes felt to students like a series of standards imposed externally and inconsistently to trip them up. Linnie Jones, parent and grandparent of AMY students, reflected back on her thinking about why soliciting students' voices was an essential step in bridging that gap.

I went through Philadelphia public schools myself. I was active in every school my three children and granddaughter attended by getting to know what was going on in the school and doing all I could to make sure that it was a good place for children to spend their days. I became a regional representative of the Philadelphia Home and School Council, the umbrella organization for all Home and School Associations, to help inform parents about what they should know about schools and what they needed to do to help make school a good place to be and to correct problems they came up against. Later I became an officer of Home and School Council and am now finishing my term as president. So even though I knew that more of the very good things were happening at AMY than at other good schools, I also knew from experience working on the other side of the school system that every school had its own challenges and outside obstacles to face to be an exemplary school.

A parent encouraged seeking out students as informants:
"The best way to find out [some answers] is to look at the kids,
hear what they have to say."

I remember talking with parents on the TS/MC team, the Governance Council, and the Home and School [Council] about how faculty might be so caught up in ideas about how teachers teach and students learn, figuring out how to make those changes, trying to keep making things better, and getting around some of the school district bureaucracy, that they might get so carried away that they knew more about their own concerns than they did about the students'. We too wanted AMY to succeed, to get as close to following through on its Mission Statement as possible for all students. My own [child], of course, came first. But as a parent who represented other parents' interests in sound public education, and like other parents who found AMY an oasis, I

wanted AMY to be stronger to give other schools confidence to not limit themselves. Since there were reasons to praise AMY to the skies, yet there were also deep concerns or questions, I agreed with other parents on the TS/MC team that the only way for AMY to be its strongest was for student voices to be clearly part of the school conversation.

"I didn't realize I was thinking clearly about these things until you asked the questions," said an AMY student.

I know how hard it is to listen and hear what a child is understanding or saying when there are only three in the house. I also know how hard it can be for them to hear what I have to say and know what I really mean. I know how frustrating it is to get blank stares or downcast eyes when I tell my kids the same thing it seems for the hundredth time and it's like the first time that they hear me say it. Now that I am a grandmother, I have started looking at myself and asking what I need to do so I just don't give kids information I want or need them to have, but communicate information in a way that meets their wants or needs so they do what needs to be done. Even though classes at AMY are very small, there are six to seven or eight times more voices to understand and ears to reach in each classroom, more than 90 times as many in the whole school. So it seemed to me that it was very important to have a way for faculty to know more about what was in students' heads than what faculty or parents might think we knew.

Parents on the team agreed that if students were truly going to be workers and teachers were going to be their coaches, not their managers, then kids needed to do what they could to explain what AMY was doing and not doing. We kept asking: How do we know that AMY is getting the results it claims unless we ask students about their experience? How do we know what is working or not coming through unless we find out what kids think about what's going on and what students who graduated from AMY look back on? That is why I pushed to have students participate in the TS/MC project as co-researchers. I didn't think it was a frill or a come-on to make us more interesting. I believed that the students had very valuable information to offer that we might never hear unless we asked. So I wasn't surprised to hear one student comment about her participation in TS/MC, "I didn't realize I was thinking clearly about these things until you asked the questions."

So AMY chose to investigate student experience. We began our research by gathering a group of 8th graders together and saying to them, “We want to work with you for the rest of this year, asking you about your experiences at AMY, and then we want you to come back next year and tell us how AMY prepared you for high school.” Two researchers from the Center of Urban Ethnography (CUE) at the University of Pennsylvania and two AMY teachers met with the students to talk about the process. We didn’t know exactly what the research would look like, but we did know that we wanted to start with focus group interviews where researchers and parents would ask them about their experiences. Later Gene Campher, a teacher and TS/MC member, recalled his uneasiness and excitement at this first meeting with students.

The formation of Cohort I, the first students selected for the focus groups, was a defining moment for me. First, it signaled an end to one aspect of the planning, while moving us toward data collection. I recall us (Jody, Lana, Jolley, and me) sitting in a room trying to explain the process to some 20-25 eighth graders and what it would demand of them and mean to us.

This leads to the second point. The students asked questions for nearly 30 minutes of such a mature nature that we, the adults, were so im-



pressed that I felt we had gotten the answer to our question already. The questions were thoughtful, high level, generally focused on the task and rarely personal. They cared about the process and its results. One asks, "What's the purpose of this?" Someone else asks, "Could we listen to the tapes later?" Another student, "What about the quiet people, are you going to make them speak?" Yet another, "Will we be benefiting from this?" They trusted the adults who were there enough to speak their mind freely. Hitting close to home, a student asks Lana and me (the two teachers in the room), "You won't be there? Why? Don't you want to know what we're saying?" I knew then that the focus groups would be a rich source of information.

We talk about empowering students, we must be honest enough to hear what they have to say.

Looking back on that meeting, I ask myself what happened. I know now that I had a lot of fears going in. What if the students didn't buy into the research, then what? Was I really prepared to hear what they had to say? What would it mean professionally and personally if I did not like what was said? It meant putting one's belief system on the line and taking whatever came along.



We often talk of school climate and school culture, but it's usually from the viewpoint of adults, the ones "in charge." Here we were daring to ask our consumers, current students, how they thought about what was happening with them and to them. To their credit, the students jumped at the opportunity to let us know how they felt about our school as it related to them and were eager to tell us what they liked and disliked. What a novel idea, asking students what the school setting looked and felt like to them! Considering that no one had ever asked them before in any organized fashion, this must have been a definitive moment for them as well. I'm sure they must have asked themselves and each other, "Are they serious? Do I dare tell them what I really think?" We talk about empowering students, we must be honest enough to hear what they have to say.

Teachers Listening to Students

On "exit" or graduation requirements:

[The teachers] know in their heads what they want. They just don't sit down and put it all together at the beginning of the year. They just sort of spring it on us whenever they finish something. They act as though we should understand it all, but they forget we aren't going through it all with them. One teacher tells me one thing about what it means to be "exemplary" and another one tells me the same thing is "proficient." I think they should all agree before you get one telling you one thing and another teacher telling you something else.

Nicole, AMY student

As the principal later put it, "I thought we'd pose the [research] question, gather some data, and say yes or no. . . [But] we didn't know what kids were going to say." A teacher wondered, "What allowed these kids to think that they could say what they said? Working with kids in this way was risky. Why did we think we could pull this off?" Even for adults who really wanted to hear what students had to say, listening to students' experiences of schooling could be jolting, disorienting, difficult. Furthermore, what adults heard from students was not a single message or viewpoint but rather multiple messages, not only because of the number of youngsters speaking but also because of the multiple and differently positioned adults listening. Not only did parents, principal, teachers, and researchers bring different histories to the table, but also some teachers on the team who were no longer teaching these students.

While parents and CUE staff conducted focus groups, staff chose not to be present at the interviews so as not to inhibit what students would say. Therefore, transcripts (with

students' names withheld as promised) provided staff's first window on what students were saying. Teacher Lana Gold recalled how disorienting she found the first transcripts from focus groups of students she had taught.

I remember my anticipation around the first set of transcripts. The students that were in the focus groups had been my students for the previous two years. I felt I knew them well and that we had established a relationship built on trust and mutual respect. As I read the transcripts I was brought to tears, touched by the tremendous sensitivity, insights, and forthrightness of these young people.

The following excerpts are from that first transcript of Dec., 1993:

Interviewer: How do you think AMY has gotten you ready for high school?

Male 1: This school has a reputation for other people. Everybody thinks it's a real great school. And everybody is so highly intellectual. It's not. They have to change the way they think. If we go to high school with this reputation, the high school expects something. Like I said, if we go to another school, they're going to expect us to have this and this and this because we went to a smart school. But we're not.

Male 3: It's a great school.

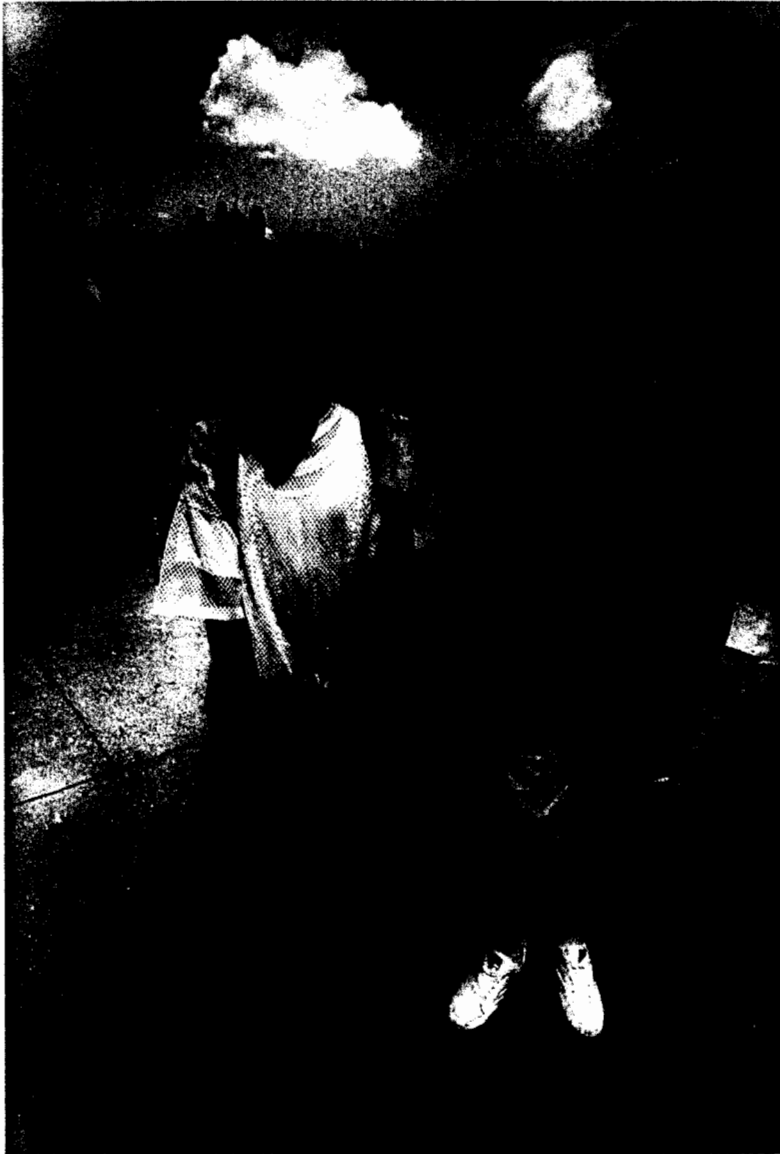
Male 2: We've got a good reputation.

[Interviewer asks students for feelings around narrative evaluations.]

Female 2: And that might be a problem because if the teacher might say something it might mean something else to another person. Like if they say I'm talkative I might be talkative in a good way and the high school might look at it like I'm talking just to be talking.

[Interviewer asks about issues of trust and consistency around those issues.]

Female 2: What I don't understand is we have a CLUE [elective] course that's about working someplace in your neighborhood, and I would have to walk all the way down or take a bus. And if I could do that then I could cross the street to Roy Rogers, they don't let us cross the



street cause they think we're gonna cut or get hit by a car, but they expect us to go all over the city on that mini-course but we can't cross the street. I have a solution, like if people cut have a sign-out sheet, you have a security guard, cause if you do cut other people shouldn't get penalized, cause I think we can cross the street, it does get me if they expect us to be so mature, we cross the street everyday, we're not first graders. (laughter)

Male 1: Yeah, we went to Logan Square and we walked all the way down the 13th and Market— (others break in and describe some free time they had on a trip downtown).

Interviewer: I get the idea. So you must have felt good about that.

Male 2: Why don't we bring that up?

Interviewer: Where do you bring something like that up?

Female 2: Yeah, we always do that in class and sometimes the whole class will start talking.

Interviewer: What do you think about that? The teacher will go with it?

Female 2: Yeah, that's another good thing. Teachers really do listen to you.

Male 2: And we can all go to Mrs. _____ [principal].

[Interviewer asks what it means to be successful at AMY.]

Female 2: I'm a good student but that's not successful here. I think I'm good at being friends with people and I know I'm successful at that because (laughs), I don't know, people always laugh at me and like if I come to 'em and start talking to 'em, they don't think I'm weird or anything. I don't know, they like me as a friend, I guess.

Interviewer: Could you tell me more about the kinds of kids at AMY?

(laughter)

Male 2: The kinds of kids at AMY—just go on the street, right, just walk down the street and you'll see every single person that would go to AMY. Except there ain't a lot of Chinese here.

Male 1: Asian.

Voices: There's all kinds of people here. It's very diverse in attitudes and stuff like that.

Female 2: There's other people that get along, like I get along with these people here, and um that comes easy to me anyway cause I'm a nice person. And you gotta be involved with other races anyway—I

like it cause it's racially mixed. In some other schools it's like the black people sitting here, the white people sitting there and Puerto Ricans over there. I think it's kinda fun, you get to learn about other cultures and like I have a lot of questions about other cultures. It's fun.

During our transcript analysis meeting about this particular set of transcripts, I remarked, "It almost creeped me out reading this....They became a mini-society amongst themselves that I'm not aware of, a community of kids with a culture unto themselves that I'm alien to." None seemed to hesitate with questions. They are cognizant about what's happening. They hung together. The experience seemed unifying. There is not a lot of contradiction between them. They share a value system.

What adults heard from students was not a single message or viewpoint but rather multiple messages.

This was an extremely powerful moment for me because I thought I knew these kids so well, only to discover that I knew only one level. I wasn't aware of these "sub-communities." I could only liken it to what it was like when my own children became socialized and had a life outside of our home, one that was somewhat unknown to me. That was a startling revelation and so was this. As our TS/MC team discussed this matter, we wondered if the "elephant" [in the living room that no one ever mentions] for us isn't our students.

Another time that stands out for me was in the spring of 1994. Mr. Campher and I brought the entire group together and told them that in November the TS/MC team was going to do a presentation at the Fall Forum for the Coalition of Essential Schools in Chicago. It was our desire to take two students with us and all expenses would be paid. Needless to say, there was a reaction of excitement on the part of everyone. We asked the group to brainstorm qualities that they thought would be important for these emissaries to possess. The responses were, "trust, good behavior, good academic skills, self-confidence, the ability to talk to a large group of people, willingness to do the work involved." Mr. Campher and I just gave each other a knowing smile of relief and appreciation for a job well done by these kids.

Our next statement however was met with somewhat less enthusiasm. We told the students that the choice of the students going would be up to them. There was a vast look of incredulity. We left the room

Interviewer: What does it mean to “learn it”?

Student: To keep it in your head for a long time.

Interviewer: And what do you think you would need to be able to do that? So you could say, ‘If you’re going to teach pre-algebra again, this is what kids need?’

The student does not respond directly here but, in an apparent effort to make sure the teacher is not discredited for her efforts, responds: “She taught pretty good because she made me understand some of what I knew. I should’ve just learned it. At the time, I was doing it, doing it well...”

Questions about our own teaching arise upon the relating or reading of a text which required us to once more address the nature of the learning experiences we provide for children. Have we addressed the complicated issue of sufficiently providing both language and contextual experience that enable students to translate and transfer their knowledge? How do we strengthen the scaffold upon which more complex knowledge depends? Does our emphasis on product outweigh an emphasis on process that results in products that are substandard? Are the consequences for producing substandard products understood by the workers (students) to be of such little merit that students disregard our efforts? Are tasks of such limited authenticity that they find engagement difficult? Are we applying what we know about the developmental needs of early adolescents as we restructure ourselves? The questions abound. They are asked within the structure of the casual conversations that are a part of every AMY staff encounter.

At AMY, caring adults solicited students’ voices, then worked hard to hear what students were saying about their experiences as learners. These are favorable conditions for communications across cultural borders. Nevertheless, Pat’s questions as she puzzled over this piece of transcript gave evidence of the ongoing challenges of adult-student communications. As students reported their difficulty understanding their teachers’ demands and expectations, so their teachers struggled to see the world—mathematically, linguistically, socially—from their students’ perspectives. Although teachers come with years of experience and beliefs about what helps kids learn, it is the setting aside of these very beliefs that may sometimes be necessary to take in their students’ perspectives, as both Lana and Pat suggested. This can be painful, *especially* for concerned adults.

Students Becoming Researchers and Agents of Change in Their Schools

Some of the recommendations from students were:

Recommendations for consistency: Make standards, expectations, and practices very clear across the grades and subject areas at the beginning of the years. Give students rubrics at the beginning of the year. Spend time to show how they work and plan strategies so students can learn to use them for all work.

Recommendations for accountability: Find out whether teachers are doing what they claim they are doing. Make sure that the same standards and expectations of work are similar from teacher to teacher and are clearly understood by students.

Recommendations for building student trust: Make AMY more for kids than adults. Think kids will do the right thing. Trust kids even when they seem to be breaking it so that they learn how to become trusted. Don't use bribes or threats to gain trust or respect. Group people who are different, so all relate to one another and can see better how to do things well.



After our initial focus groups with students, they remained adamant about asking how and when the research would resume. Their agitation pushed the team to convene more meetings with the students. First, they wanted to look at the focus group transcripts to see how their voices came across, so we convened the group for a data analysis session. For Bonnie Mason, parent of three children who attended AMY, this was a key moment for helping the team begin to see how students could take an active role in the research and the reform.

I was very anxious to hear student reactions to their own conversation because I was so impressed listening to what they had to say about their experience at AMY. Following [the first focus group] I wrote, “[Students] expressed concerns as learning opportunities and raised ‘complaints’ as mature critical questions.” The transcripts seemed so flat after having paid attention to the way students warmed up to the discussion, exchanged glances, shifted in their seats, inflected their words to underscore points, and changed their tones to communicate their underlying feelings.

I went into the first [student] analysis session with all of these things buzzing in my head. That session turned out to be what I experienced as the first critical moment for the entire team as students in Cohort I moved from being informants to researchers by their own initiative.

Some of the students sat studiously reading the transcripts. Others were riffling pages back and forth trying to find things they had said and remembered friends having said. Every once in a while they would quietly consult with one another. Nevertheless, there seemed to be a very tense silence in the room. Several students appeared not to be very engaged or to be bordering on resentment.

Monika seemed to be intently reading and on task with Jody’s assignment to find things that stood out as important in the transcripts. She looked up and said to Jody, “Can I ask a question? I know this is me here—do I really talk like that? It doesn’t sound like I think I sound. I know I said this one thing here. I know it is me saying it, but I don’t feel the same way now. Can I change this?” Jody replied, “That is an excellent question and shows that you have a good sense that you are an important part of the analysis process. Part of looking at data you produce yourself is being able to see how circumstances change and how that makes the data change. When researchers reflect, they are able to correct it in light of the changes. Just write what you would say now in the margin.”

Students began perking up after Jody's response. They seemed to feel more confident about their own roles once Monika had taken action. One boy was particularly encouraged. "You know, I can see that I'm here, this is my group on the paper. But it's hard for me to remember *how* people said things to see what they really meant. The way it's down here doesn't tell me. If I could hear it instead of read it, I would be able to understand the way they were saying it. Can, do you think we could hear the tapes?" That was the moment when everyone became very animated. Others joined in to second his opinion. All of them moved from responding to what they were being asked to do for the team and began discussing how they wanted to participate in the research.

As students discussed the focus group experience with team members who were and were not present, it became clear that they were sketching in another piece of the research design.

Part of looking at data you produce yourself is being able to see how circumstances change and how that makes the data change.

Monika's question, which manifested her dual role as informant and co-researcher, catapulted our group into a new understanding of how to think about the use of data collected in an ongoing action/research/action cycle. Parents and CUE staffer Jody Cohen continued to meet with students, analyzing and embroidering data. Students began to hone their perspectives on such critical issues as assessment of student learning, standards and expectations, and accountability within the school community. The parents working closely with students began to see that teachers deeply involved with making change were sometimes too close to this work to communicate effectively with parents and students who hadn't been in on the whole process. Parents, teachers, principal, and students involved with TS/MC struggled to listen to each other, sharing stakes despite their differing perspectives and positions of power. In the process, they discovered that the move from individual listening to the collective listening that can guide change was far from automatic. Furthermore, the TS/MC team represented only a fraction of the faculty, pointing up the likelihood that even greater dissension lay in store.



As the school year drew to a close, the team sought a wider hearing for students. Jody Cohen recalled this as a moment when the process was called into question.

We'd been meeting with a very involved sub-group of about ten Cohort I students all spring. We'd drafted a set of recommendations and the kids were nervous—but ready—to speak before faculty and governance council. But as graduation fast approached, regular meeting times were booked. The team brainstormed and came up with this compromise: Students would address faculty during lunch in the library, hand out recommendations, and videotape the proceedings. Student reps arrived, lined up chairs as a panel, nervously looked over the questions. But by ten after the hour only the TS/MC team and several other faculty had shown up. The noise from recess outside the library windows drowned out the first reticent voices. Then a student inadvertently named a teacher's name, and we stopped taping to consider alternatives. What a letdown. Didn't faculty *want* to hear their students?

Soliciting student voices led to students' consideration of what they thought and knew, which in turn led to the realization on the parts of TS/MC parents and staff that students' voices were a key, if often missing, ingredient in school change efforts. The work

of disseminating students' perspectives and integrating student voices in a long-term way into reform at AMY continues. Bonnie Mason reflected on this far from linear process.

A reform that was introduced over a four year period is written evaluations of progress to replace the A-F grading system that ranks students' performance but says very little about what students know and are able to do. What became apparent about written evaluations is that the concept in theory takes considerable time and revision to get right in practice. As students pointed out, evaluations were not uniform from teacher to teacher within the same team let alone across the grades. Although parents understood that evaluations were supposed to help them understand what each child was doing, the absence of clear criteria and expectations made it difficult to judge whether they were doing well or needed help. The question remained: What do the written evaluations tell us about achievement?

Students take their own experience seriously enough to ponder what it means, what conflicts they encounter, and what alternatives to consider.

The problems with written evaluations for the whole community did not mean that they were useless and should be abandoned. One of the outcomes of learning to Take Stock/Make Change was seeing that each segment of the community perceived glitches but also sought constructive alternatives. During a data analysis session in the second year, a parent observed that the problem with written evaluations was not so much resistance to the idea as lack of necessary transition from the old system to the new. This echoed the student suggestion to include both narrative and grades. Making it possible for parents and students to make the transition from grades to narratives, faculty had to clarify not only the outcome they were attempting to achieve but also the process needed to achieve it. That meant there had to be not only standards of achievement but also clear rubrics for attaining the standards that made it clear what students needed to know and be able to do *and* what specifically they needed to do to demonstrate their work as proficient or exemplary.

Yet it is very important to note that there is and was no simple cause and effect between what the team could see in the data and constant revision of changes. Faculty did not reevaluate narratives or propose standards *because of* student recommendations or parental concern. The AMY learning plan already called for developing learning out-

The 11 of us took our places nervously seated in a semi-circle behind tables facing the audience who filled a classroom at the University of Pennsylvania. I listened to the kids introduce themselves and tell what AMY meant to them and how it prepared them for high school. All of them mentioned that AMY was small and had teachers they could talk to and who cared about them. Two particular student voices stood out. Monika said, "AMY prepared me for high school because I can deal with people better than before. I didn't have a high tolerance for people. I didn't have an attitude or anything....I'd just rather stay in a room with a hundred animals. Now I can communicate with people and work in groups. I am a very independent person and AMY really helped with group skills." I laughed to myself and remembered the changes in Monika from a quiet observer to a young woman who could put her ideas across forcefully yet with consideration of another's point of view. Later in the presentation Monika returned to the theme of communication. She said, "At AMY you could have a conversation with anyone, the principal, the teachers. In high school there was a big change. In a way AMY hurt me; well, not exactly hurt me, I don't know what to say. At AMY if I had a problem I'd go talk to the teacher, but in high school the teachers have the thinking role. . . 'Hey, I'm the teacher, you're the student, you listen.' Recently I had a problem with the teacher and I said, 'Hey can't we talk about it?' And he's like, 'No!' So that part was difficult."

The original research question about how AMY was preparing its students for high school was turned on its head as students suggested that high schools were not prepared for them.

The second student whose voice stood out for me was Carl's. I was surprised and pleased to hear him speak at length because in the three years at AMY, he had struck me as a quiet youngster who rarely spoke out. Someone in the audience asked him directly, "Coming from AMY which is a small, family type school, how did you adjust to your large high school?" Carl replied that he had adjusted well. "Going to school with different races is the same. Class size isn't that different, but the environment is different. It's bad. The fighting and violence and drugs is a big change from when I went to AMY." The participant pressed, asking, "How did AMY prepare you for being in a bad environment?" Carl replied, "In a way it didn't prepare me because I didn't have to go through it at AMY. But it did prepare me because I can take more now....I have to ride the subway to school. My patience is better. I can deal with people with mouths and stuff. I can deal with that." To the next question, "Are you going to stay there?" Carl answered, "No. I'm transferring to St. John's on a basketball scholarship." I felt at once

proud of Carl's maturity in dealing with potential violence and sorrow that he would be leaving his public high school which needs youngsters with his fortitude and insight.

The process had become the product: Listening to students' voices became the point.

At the end of the conference, a member of the audience asked, "What responsibility do kids have when they get to high school to make them more like AMY? Have you given any thought to preparing kids to be change agents?" My stomach tightened and I thought angrily, "Why should kids have to bear that risk? We adults need to assume our responsibility to change schools before we send kids in to get chewed up." One of the AMY teachers spoke of how she worked with kids to teach them how to question authority thoughtfully and respectfully. A parent shared her view that "there's only so much you can do. At AMY there is a certain sense of mutual responsibility and you have to have a certain degree of integrity for the choices you make. It's the individual within the small group of kids who might do something. I don't think it's going to be a major movement." Carl ended by saying, "I've been talking to my teachers trying to make a change for the students who have to stay there because their parents believe in public schools. My mom believes in public schools and wants me to stay. But some of the teachers don't care if you leave or if you stay. They don't want to hear your opinions or what you have to say. That was a change for me. I try to talk to my teachers, the counselor, the principal but I don't know that I'll get through. I'm trying."

I had tucked the Ethnography Forum experience in my memory until I started to prepare for this collaborative summary. As we shared our memories of what stood out for us during our two years of research, I began to think about the school's mission statement. I wondered if our student data would correlate with our stated vision. We've written the words at the top of so many of our official documents. Would our intentions be borne out in data analysis? Our school's Mission Statement says: *The mission of the Academy for the Middle Years (NW) is to create a learning-centered community actively engaged in quality learning and preparation for success in a changing, diverse world.* I began to realize that the students were providing an answer as to whether we are doing what we say we are doing and whether that is preparing youngsters for high school. It is from listening to their voices that I have come to realize that at least for these students the answer to our research question is "Yes!"

Monika and Carl have both encountered change at their high schools. Both have been able to adjust to school cultures that do not provide the safety and sense of belonging that they found at AMY. Monika expressed a feeling of hurt in encountering the “thinking role” of a high school teacher and Carl spoke of his bad environment. Both conveyed confidence that they were going on in spite of these changes and Carl was trying to bring about change in his school by continuing conversations with his peers and the adults in the school. What we didn’t talk about at the Ethnography Forum was academic success. It rarely was mentioned by students as an indicator of success in our many focus group transcripts. Students focused on relational matters, on being heard and considered, on mattering to adults. Adults in schools spend a lot of time listening to youngsters. How do we expand our evaluation methods to capture and validate youngsters’ finding their own voices and taking risks to change schools so that others might also experience such success? This challenge continues to be powerful at AMY as we struggle to extend the opportunities for all our youngsters to be actively engaged and to find ways to record and value their successes in coming to voice so they can take their place in our changing diverse world.

Holly Perry reflects on students coming to voice and, in the process, becoming *de facto* change agents in their schools. She articulates a growing realization on the TS/MC team



that the data had reconfigured the initial research question, taking it to a deeper level. In fact, the data suggested a new question: Are we preparing students who can help *change* (their) schools?

The team had set out to solicit student voices to help us answer the question, “Are we doing what we say we’re doing, and is this preparing students for high school?” The process had *become* the product: Listening to students’ voices became the point. As a teacher pointed out, perhaps students themselves were the “elephant in our midst,” both central and unrecognized. In order for the TS/MC team to hear students, we had to change how we listened to them. Each of us had to listen to students as individuals who were saying something important. Yet since each of us was differently positioned in youngsters’ lives, we also had to negotiate with one another to clarify our understandings of what students meant. By learning to listen to our students, we hope to prepare them as participants if not change agents whose voices have an integral part in taking stock and making real change in our schools.