Emerson Collective

Amanda Ripley: What Kids Can Tell Us (If Only We Would Ask)

Amanda Ripley is a Emerson Senior Fellow & author of The Smartest Kids in the World—and How They Got That Way

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Over the course of one week this December, U.S. newspapers ran more than 400 education stories—earnest dispatches on class sizes, teaching and online learning. From the Fresno Bee to the New York Times, every story included the opinion of at least one adult, including school board members, teachers and parents. But only about 2 in every 10 of these stories included the voice of an actual student (often as a garnish at the end of the piece, with a quote that echoed what the adults had already said).

It’s odd, isn’t it? Given all our angst about education, you’d think we would be more interested in the opinions of the people who know it best. But in the media and in school boards and city halls, most students are silent partners in the education debate. Less than half of American high-school students believe they have a voice in decision-making at their schools, according to a survey of 58,000 students conducted by the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations.

“When journalists and policymakers don’t see much value in speaking with young people. In their minds, students are not experts,” says Nikhil Goyal, the 18-year-old author of the forthcoming book, Reclaiming Our Freedom to Learn. “The cost of this omission is that awful decisions and policies are put into effect.”

What could kids tell us if we asked? When asked intelligent questions, students are more reliable at identifying effective teachers than trained adult observers, according to a study of 3,000 classrooms in seven cities. Why? Because kids (unlike principals) don’t just parachute into the classroom for 30 minutes every couple of months; they come every day, and there are more of them. So their opinions, taken together, tend to be more meaningful and fair.

Worldwide, according to OECD data released earlier this month, education systems that routinely seek written feedback from students tend to be fairer countries where poverty is less damning. (The U.S. ranks in middle of the pack on this metric, with less than 60% of teenagers attending schools that routinely solicit their feedback. In countries like New Zealand, the Netherlands and Estonia, over 80% of students attend such schools.)

In my own reporting, I’ve found that students are usually less ideological and more honest than adults; they care less about policy flashpoints and more about the things that affect them every day—from teachers to parents to other students. They talk about the whole tapestry of their lives, not just the policy silos that captivate adults. They make my stories more interesting and more
accurate. (And getting permission from their parents to interview them is not hard, since so many schools now collect media releases from parents as a matter of course.)

Adults spend a lot of energy trying to get students’ attention in school. We bribe kids and punish them and invest in all manner of high-tech devices and professional development to try to entice them into caring. But maybe the answer is simpler. Maybe we could make school more engaging by asking kids how it could be more engaging.

If we did listen to students, if we let them shape the debate, what would happen? The best story that came out that random December week offers one glimpse. For that piece, The Chicago Tribune obtained and analyzed the results of an unprecedented statewide survey that had not been released in full by education officials. This survey included the voices of 740,000 students, a remarkable treasure trove.

So what did the kids say? Almost half of Illinois students said they were never or seldom asked hard questions in their main academic classes. Forty percent said they were rarely or never given challenging test questions. Less than half of the junior high and high school students surveyed felt “very safe” in their school hallways and bathrooms or walking to and from school. The messages were bright and clear, if only someone would listen.

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