Amplifying Student and Youth Voices in Education Research

Edited by
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Series in Education

VERNON PRESS

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www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200,
Wilmington, Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Education

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025930773

ISBN: 979-8-8819-0203-2

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I'd like to thank the authors of this book for their contributions to our collective knowledge, for their patience and hard work, and for their passion for building a more equitable society where people can make the most of their abilities and gifts, regardless of the conditions they happened to be born into. In the same vein, I'd like to thank all the students and youth who participated in these projects, for their time and honesty, and for motivating our work. We hope this volume helps in the process of enacting the change needed for you to thrive - everyone wins when that happens.

I'd also like to thank the editors at Vernon Press for supporting equity-based research in Education and for their guidance and advice throughout this process. Without the doors that they've opened for us, it would be much more challenging to amplify these voices.

Research is a team sport across time and space - we are stronger not only because of those who came before us, but also because of those we have around us. As such, I'd like to thank everyone who supported this work, directly or indirectly, especially my colleagues at NYU Metro Center; putting youth's voices and experiences at the center of our work would be so much harder without you constantly pushing my thinking and research, and your ever-present encouragement regardless of how towering the challenges may be.

Finally, I thank my family and friends for their unwavering support, especially Gabriel, for always believing in my projects (usually more than I do) and my capacity to bring them to fruition. And Niebla, for always making me smile, even when she's not around.

Introduction

For the longest time, the voices of those most affected by educational disparities and inequities were absent from the process of trying to find solutions to the very issues with which they were affected. Therefore, we were left with partial solutions that presumed to understand the issues creating these disparities, when, in fact, we lacked the first-hand perspectives that were essential to make sense of the problem. It wasn't until the 1990s that researchers (e.g., Kozol, 1991; Fullan, 1991; Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996; Weis and Fine, 1993) began addressing student involvement in discussions that previously excluded them, i.e., they explored ways to invite students into conversations where they had only been passive subjects rather than active participants. Thus, these authors began to "challenge dominant images of students as silent, passive recipients of what others define as education" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.361).

By including students' perspectives, researchers can now begin to identify and understand the inequities that pervade students' contexts, inequities that are usually obscured by a narrow focus on academic performance metrics.

As students and youth started to become valid contributors in the process of informing change and improving practices in educational settings, the concept of voice started gaining traction and notoriety. However, voice is certainly not a monolithic concept; there is no one agreed-upon definition, and I believe this collection of works is a testament to that. Within the range of definitions that exist, these works put students' and youth' experiences, discourses, explanations, and critiques front and center.

From different corners of the world, and looking at different educational levels, the chapters in this volume shed light on the enormous power that lies in making students active participants in the design, evaluation, and decision-making processes involved with educational policies and practices.

This understanding is also captured through a variety of sources, and the chapters in this volume include not only well-known, more traditional, methods of data collection, such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups, but also more unconventional and innovative methods, such as podcasts and photovoice, which expand the possibilities in which students can (re)construct, communicate, and make sense of their experiences.

In **Chapter 1**, *Constanza Alvarado* and *Lorena Medina* delved into "the complexity that characterizes quality, effective, and expert teachers" (p.11), in other words, what it means to be a good teacher in Chile, according to students.

The authors take on the challenge of examining whether the current parameters of quality teaching were, in fact, congruent with what students deemed to be the qualities of a good teacher. Throughout the chapter, the authors pose several important questions and reflections regarding how this study has a direct impact on teacher initial training and invites us to dig deeper into some aspects that have been taken for granted, especially in the Chilean context.

In **Chapter 2**, *Maria Verónica Santelices, Ximena Catalán, Magdalena Zarhi, Laura Muñoz*, and *Alicia Ibáñez* explore the higher education transition decision-making process for a student population that is often understudied, students in technical-vocational schools. Through their interviews with students, the authors explore the breath and relevance of factors that affect students' post-secondary trajectories, with particular attention to the sources and quality of information they receive to inform their decisions.

In **Chapter 3**, *Loretta Fernández, Erika Abarca Millán*, and *Ana Flores* focus on the voices of doctoral Latinx students who examine their mentoring/advising experiences, needs, and expectations in higher education and how these are usually impacted by cultural differences with their advisors/mentors. As they analyze students' experiences, the authors reflect on the bicultural, multifaceted, fluid, and complex identities of Latinx graduate students and offer concrete steps for advisors/mentors and institutions to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

In **Chapter 4**, *Neerusha Baurhoo Gokool* focuses on the voices of a different group of students in higher education; college students in Canada who have Learning Disabilities. Through a photovoice approach, Dr. Baurhoo Gokool offers a safe space for students to open up about their challenges and specific needs as they navigate higher education. In this interesting visual approach, students document their experiences by taking photographs and recording their experiences through reflexive journaling. Despite the platitude of challenges they faced, students showed their persistence and resilience and discussed their coping mechanisms and learning strategies.

In **Chapter 5**, *Erika Abarca Millán, María Victoria Zambrano*, and *Rosa Bahamondes* use a case study to center the voice of one autistic college student in Chile. In this chapter, the authors dive into Samantha's bumpy journey, one that was full of misdiagnoses and challenges, both personal and academic. However, Samantha's story is also an empowering one that demonstrates how a proper diagnosis led to her embracing her new identity as a neurodiverse student and empowered her to show her full potential, becoming a leader for other students. Samantha's experiences also foreground the importance of the support she received and the many issues that still need to be addressed for neurodiverse students to have a place in university and feel part of the academic community.

In **Chapter 6**, *Shiv Desai* discussed part of his work with LOUD (Leaders Organizing 2 Unite and Decriminalize) and youth in the juvenile justice system. Dr. Desai focuses on the testimonios of youth who talk about the damaging effects the system has had in their lives and their families'. Through these youth testimonios and stories, they not only point to the inherent systemic flaws, but also envision a juvenile justice system that moves away from a purely punitive model and embraces youth, and their needs, more holistically.

Finally, we close this volume with **chapter 7**, where *Victoria Surtees* explored the podcast as a method that is rapidly gaining more ground and that can serve as a medium for amplifying and disseminating students' counterstories. Dr. Surtees approaches podcasting as a reflective and participatory process and discusses the intersections between this method and critical research methods in Education, while addressing challenges regarding confidentiality, participant safety, and positionality.

Whether it be through instruction, research or policy, I truly hope that this volume serves as an inspiration to put in motion all the work that remains to be done, and to provide all students and youth, regardless of their characteristics and context, with the specific resources they need to thrive in their personal and academic journeys. More importantly, I hope this volume emphasizes the need to amplify students' and youths' voices in the matters that affect them directly; as the ones with first-hand experience and knowledge, their stories and experiences should have a central role in informing how the systems they are engaged in can be more equitable and sustainable.

It is only when we fully embrace the idea that students and youth are not passive recipients of change, but rightful architects of the solutions to the critical challenges affecting them, that we can move towards a more equitable, tolerant, and diverse-embracing society.

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