

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN TIMES OF TURBULENT CHANGE

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ABSTRACT. This study examines students' perceptions of the impact of the implementation of a broad-based secondary school reform agenda on their engagement with their schools and with their learning. The literature related to large-scale reform is largely based on educators' perceptions and on the influence of the reforms on teachers and schools. This paper adds the voice of students by focusing specifically on how Secondary School Reform in Ontario was being understood and felt in schools by students.

As part of a larger study, researchers conducted focus groups with teachers and students in 6 geographically dispersed schools in Ontario in the early stages of implementation of the provincial governments Secondary School Reform (SSR). SSR not only encompasses a multitude of changes, but the political context in the early days of implementation was particularly rocky and rancorous. The students in the study gave vivid accounts of how the reforms and the context in which they were being implemented were affecting them.

ENGAGEMENT DES ÉLÈVES EN PÉRIODE DE RÉFORMES DRACONIENNES

RÉSUMÉ. Cette étude analyse les perceptions que les élèves se font de l'impact de l'adoption d'un programme de vastes réformes du cursus secondaire sur leur engagement envers leurs écoles et leurs études. La littérature se rapportant aux réformes à grande échelle repose essentiellement sur les perceptions des éducateurs et sur l'effet des réformes sur les professeurs et les écoles. Cet article ajoute la voix des élèves en se concentrant expressément sur la façon dont la réforme du secondaire en Ontario a été comprise et ressentie par les élèves dans les écoles.

Dans le cadre d'une étude plus importante, les chercheurs ont organisé des groupes de discussion avec les professeurs et les élèves de six écoles disséminées sur le plan géographique en Ontario au tout début de la mise en œuvre de la réforme du cursus secondaire par le gouvernement provincial. La réforme du secondaire n'englobe pas seulement une multitude de changements, mais le contexte politique des débuts de sa mise en œuvre a été particulièrement difficile et chargé de rancœur. Les élèves qui ont participé à l'étude ont donné des comptes rendus très vivants de l'impact que la réforme et le contexte où elle s'est déroulée ont eu sur eux.

Introduction

In the 1990's large-scale reform orchestrated by provincial, state or national governments has emerged around the world (Fullan, 2000) with governments adhering to surprisingly similar mandates. Geoff Whitty and his colleagues (1997) studied legislative changes to education in Australia, England and Wales, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States. Each country had its unique history and context, but the governments had all introduced policies that sought to reformulate the relationship between government, schools and parents. All involved increased responsibility for individual schools, a reduction of power for district school boards or local education authorities; more power and responsibility to parents; changes to and centralization of curriculum; the introduction of standards or expectations for student learning, centralized assessment schemes; and decreased resources and support for education. Management of reduced resources was shifted to the shoulders of local school administrators and school councils, while central governments retained tight control through prescribed curricula, assessment schemes and, in some cases, organized school inspections.

A multitude of researchers have been studying the influence of the reforms on teachers and schools (e.g., Earl et al., 2000, 2001; Bryk et al., 1998; Wiley, 1997; Elmore, 1996; Nias, 1991). There has been less attention, however, to the influence of these reforms on students. This paper adds the voice of students, using empirical data focused specifically on how Secondary School Reform (SSR) in Ontario was being understood and experienced in schools by students.

Large-scale reform in Ontario

Educational reform is not a new phenomenon in Ontario. During the 70s and the 80s, countries, states and provinces mounted commissions, did studies, wrote reports, held think tanks and developed policies directed at improving the quality of education in their schools (Gidney, 2000). From the ROSE Report (Reform of Secondary Education) in 1982 to the Royal Commission on Learning in 1995 successive governments have focused on education, particularly in secondary schools.

The Royal Commission on Learning in 1995 was the beginning of the current wave of reform in Ontario. Even though this commission was an initiative of the NDP government, it formed the basis for many of the reforms that were announced by the Conservative government that came to power shortly after the commission report was released. During the Royal Commission, every part of the educational system came under scrutiny. Many of the recommendations directly concerned secondary schools. Since then, both NDP and Conservative provincial governments have moved

quickly to enact legislation and set policy designed to achieve massive educational change.

SSR in Ontario was introduced formally in 1997 as part of a major education bill - the Education Quality Improvement Act. The reforms were to be phased into schools beginning in 1997/98 with Grade 7 students, preparing them for the new high school program that they would encounter in 1999. A return to streaming in Grade 9, the introduction of the new Ontario Secondary School (OSS) curriculum, and a 4-year high school program (reduced from 5) were to be phased in over a period of years with full implementation in place by the 2002-03 school year. At the same time, the government released a new funding model that removed taxation for education from municipalities and positioned it in the provincial purview, established school advisory councils and mandated the amount of instructional time in a teacher's day and average class size in districts.

The political context in Ontario that has accompanied large-scale reform has not been smooth or pleasant. From the early days of the Conservative government, teachers and politicians have been at loggerheads. In 1995 the then Minister of Education made a private statement that became public about his intention to "invent a crisis" in education.

In quick succession, the government:

- created the Education Quality and Accountability Office, the Ontario College of Teachers and the Education Improvement Commission;
- passed an omnibus education bill (Bill 160) that included changes to teachers' powers within collective bargaining, including staffing, class size, preparation time and instructional time, restricted strike actions and established school councils;
- amalgamated and restructured school boards; and
- changed funding regulations to locate funding decisions provincially.

These actions culminated in a province wide teachers' walkout in October 1997. In opposition to "the heavy hand of government," teacher federations took a strong position and staged a walkout in protest.

Although teachers stayed out for two weeks, many of the changes went forward as planned. Educational funding was placed under the provincial purview, and while Boards would continue to recruit teachers and negotiate contracts with local affiliates, class size, teaching time, professional development and examination days were to be legislated by the province. Principals and vice-principals, who had been members of the Federations, were withdrawn and classified as management. Over the following few years

many school districts were subjected to difficult bargaining and a number experienced strikes.

In the spring of 1999 the government mandated that secondary school teachers teach 1250 minutes of instructional time per five instructional days, expressed as at least 6.67 eligible courses. To accommodate the regulation, courses were split between two teachers, meaning that for a portion of their timetable, a term in a semestered school, or every other day in a non-semestered school, teachers taught 4/4 classes with only a lunch break. Students had more than one teacher for a course. It was possible for students to have many courses taught by two different teachers. In response to The Education Accountability Act, OSSTF advised its membership that teachers should use their professional judgement in taking on duties beyond their professional responsibility to their curriculum and to their students. In most districts, extra-curricular activities were cancelled.

Student engagement and large-scale reform

As many of the other papers in this collection remind us, student engagement has been identified as an important precursor to student learning. Engagement of students in the life of the school and in their own learning is important in developing willingness to continue learning and to remain in school (Newmann, Wehlage and Lamborn, 1992; Leithwood and Jantzi, 1997). In fact, much of the research related to student engagement is actually focused on the conditions of disengagement and the characteristics of students, programs and schools that are associated with dropping out of school (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Smith et al., 1998). In another study, we have been examining student engagement in schools associated with the Manitoba School Improvement Program, and have found that students' sense of responsibility was a recurring theme in successful MSIP schools, learning and engagement were not passive; they were active, exciting activities that students came to seek and build for themselves (Earl, Sutherland & Torrance, 2001).

Careful listening to students appears to be a key component in understanding the impact of reform on students, as well as investigating innovative ways for educational change. As Fullan (1991, p. 182) notes, ". . . we hardly know anything about what students think about educational change because no one ever asks them." According to Levin (2000, p. 62) there must logically be a role for students in shaping the nature of schooling and hence of reform.

Methodology

This paper emerges from a larger study exploring SSR in Ontario "up close" in its initial year of implementation (Earl, Freeman, Lasky, Sutherland and

Torrance, 2002). The data were collected through focus groups with teachers and students in 6 secondary schools between April and November 2001. Because of the timing of most of the interviews in this study (May/June 2001), the teachers and the students in the focus groups were pre-occupied with the immediate concerns of the increase in teaching time and the withdrawal of extra-curricular activities in many locales.

Although a sample of six schools can never be representative of the province, the research team selected schools to bring different perspectives by including rural and urban, different geographic regions of Ontario and offering a range of programs. The schools involved in the study ranged from a small (450 students) composite school in the north to a midsize (800 students) composite school in an urban setting and a large (1450 students) rural school in the south-west of the province. The six schools were in 5 different districts. Four of these districts had undergone amalgamation and one had not.

In each participating school, principals were asked to select 6-8 students from Grades 10 and 12 to represent different academic profiles and to provide diversity within each group. All potential student participants received letters outlining the project and their parents were asked to sign consent letters agreeing to their participation. Focus groups with students lasted approximately sixty minutes in length and were conducted by a minimum of two research team members. At the beginning of each interview session the researcher reviewed ethical parameters, issues of confidentiality and reminded participants that participation was voluntary and that they were free to leave at any time. The student focus group protocol was developed using research literature related to student engagement and students' responses to school reform (Morgan & Morris, 1999; Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992; Reynolds, Sammons, Stoll, Barber, & Hillman, 1996; Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996; Soo Hoo, 1993). Student engagement can be inferred from a student's participation in academic work; interest in school; care in completing work; motivation to succeed; attitudes towards school; sense of membership in the school; and student's perception of authenticity or "real-world" connection of their work (Newman, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992). For the purposes of this report, student engagement during this era of school reform was investigated by asking questions about the nature of secondary school students' engagement with their school and with their own learning. Students were also given the opportunity to discuss, in their view, perceived changes taking place within the school and within their own classrooms.

The interviews were conducted during the school day and students were excused from class to participate. With the respondents' permission, interviews were audiotaped, and subsequently transcribed. Using Folio Views 4.2

information management software, the transcripts were analyzed by an approach consisting of categorizing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This resulted in the emergence of themes, and these are used in the presentation of the findings that follow.

What the students said

The findings reported here come largely from the students themselves, but we have included some quotes from teachers that reflect their concerns about student engagement. Students had much to say about how they were being affected by the new reforms, both academically and personally. They discussed their perceptions of a curriculum that was both condensed and more difficult, fears about the making of decisions that would disadvantage them in the future and for some, worry about the “double graduating cohort.” Finally, students discussed how secondary school reform was changing the nature of student-teacher relationships. The responses of students were closely tied to the actual changes that were being implemented, but the loss of extra curricular activities was also a central issue for them.

It was interesting to us that a number of students were fairly accepting of the changes. They felt that in several years students coming behind them would not have such a difficult time because they would be better prepared for the new curriculum, and teachers would be more familiar with it:

I think it'll settle in a few years.

Yeah, like, we were just kind of unfortunate to get here right as the change is happening because the teachers are going to stop teaching both. I think once the teachers get used to teaching nothing but the new curriculum, like, they don't have to teach the old curriculum anymore, they'll get more used to it and the students will be getting more prepared for the new curriculum through grade school.

We had to experience the new change, so, it was awkward for everybody, and we kind of got all of that on our heads, so, yeah, it was just bad timing.

This, however, did not mitigate the effects of the increased pressure and workload they experienced with the new curriculum, or the anxiety that came from teachers reactions to the changes.

CONDENSED AND DIFFICULT CURRICULUM. The new curriculum certainly was having an impact on students and some of them were having difficulty understanding why they were the ones being targeted:

About the new curriculum, I don't see why they didn't start with the Grade 1's? Why did they have to just like start eliminating OACs and cram everything together in Grade 9?

The changes to curriculum were having significant impacts on how secondary students perceived their academic learning. Both teachers and students commented

Student Engagement in Times of Turbulent Change

on the speed at which the curriculum was expected to be implemented. Compounding this concern was the condensed nature of the new curriculum. Students found the new curriculum to be both difficult and demanding. Although many students agreed, in principle, that educational change was indeed needed, they voiced concerns about the pace of the changes to the curriculum. One student captured this sentiment when he stated:

I support the idea that we need change. Yeah, I mean, obviously, like, he has good intentions, like he's [Premier Harris] not doing them in the proper fashion. But, I mean, to change it now, you'd be stuck with somebody brand new coming in with their own views trying to change things only to go through another three years of them, initially starting with the one and, then, we'd have to rope them back in again but he needs to slow down.

Another student simply noted:

If you have a hamburger, you don't shove it all in your mouth at once, you have to take a bite at a time.

Students also told us that condensing the curriculum from a five years to four years was being felt every grade level:

They're pushing all the OAC stuff into the Grade 12 course. So, instead of them going in an OAC course when they take their Grade 12, the OAC course is combined with the Grade 12 course, and some of the Grade 12 is combined with the grade level. So, they're spreading five years into four. They're moving half the Grade 12 into the Grade 11 course.

Students, particularly those in Grade 11 expressed their concerns about competing for fewer university acceptance spaces in the 2003 double graduation cohort:

I want to get into university right now with only one year graduating at a time but there's only 15 people accepted into the program. They're not going to change the numbers because they don't have any money so it's going to be twice as many people vying for the same number of positions and no one's going to be able to get in.

WORRY ABOUT MAKING BAD DECISIONS. Some students felt that they were having to make important life decisions sooner than they were prepared to make them, and they felt increased pressure to take only academic courses if they wanted a college or university track. Students also discussed having little support or guidance in negotiating their way through the new course options. This was due not only to a loss of guidance counselors, but just as importantly, to the fact that no one could tell them what courses they would need for university – no one seemed to understand the new curriculum well enough to provide students with solid advice.

Students seemed confused as the possibility and the process of switching levels within the curriculum:

At the beginning of this year, I didn't like first selection and I didn't take the right courses. I told the guidance counselors what I was doing and after the first semester they told me that I needed a Physics but I couldn't fit it into my schedule for the second semester. I could have for the first semester, but they didn't tell me that, so, I had to take night school. That was a bit of an inconvenience for me and I even went into the Guidance office and they just said, "Oh, just keep taking what you're taking."

Teachers expressed concern about students falling through the cracks, a high number of students who will not pass the literacy test, and students having restricted course options:

Students have been affected and if the teachers are overworked and stressed, that translates unto the students. Students need resources and supplies and help, and they need people who are motivated and you know getting professional developments and all kinds of things for their school life to be strong and positive. And overall they're not getting it. The strong academic students they'll always do well anyway, but the students who are weaker and needed the support aren't getting that support I don't feel. And that's where I think the system is falling behind. We're seeing high failure rates in all the applied courses, because the applied level courses are difficult. They've made them more rigorous. That isn't a bad thing, but they didn't come out with courses to deal with the majority of students who do not go on to college and university.

There were a few teachers who expressed concern for the stronger students because of their increased stress and anxiety over receiving low marks for the first time in their academic careers. The following quote is a conversation between several teachers:

And the kids are so upset about it. I've had kids in tears, absolute tears saying "I haven't even got a high enough mark to go to summer school." "You know I need three credits in math and what am I going to do?" And they need that in order to graduate. And they are good kids. Its not like they're behavioural kids or they're skipping or anything. These are kids who never miss a day of school, who are so diligent in all that they're doing, and they just can't jump through that hoop. I have concerns for them on an emotional level, their emotional well being. I've heard more kids say they hate subjects than I've ever heard ever.

They come in after having that class, they just got back a test, and if they blink you know they have tears. It supports what [name] is saying about the number of kids coming in. And for everyone you have coming in there's probably another ten in the school who are feeling the same way.

Students in all streams expressed having a difficult time with their studies, and were feeling increased pressure in many different ways. The following comments were made by students who are accustomed to doing well academically:

It's hard, you're struggling, you get tons more homework than you're supposed to, like, I spend at least two and a half-hours a night doing Math homework trying to understand it.

Yeah, and I have four other classes and it just piles up and piles up, and you get so frustrated that you just don't want to do it anymore, you just don't want to do anything, you just give up.

We have to graduate no matter what. So, the more you do the sooner you'll graduate, so, that's basically it.

The new curriculum is so heavy that I go home and cry because there is so much homework to do. Then, you have to do this for your house and, then, you have to juggle everything . . . there's a million things running through your head at the same time.

The confusion, anxiety and frustration felt by many students as a direct result of secondary school reform should act as a warning signal for future reform endeavours. To better position and prepare all stakeholders to move forward, educators need to rethink traditional assumptions about who can be an authority on educational practice (Cook-Sather, 2002). Students need to be invited to join ongoing school reform conversations.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH TEACHERS/SENSE OF ABANDONMENT. In addition to the direct influence of the changes embedded in SSR, students told us about the indirect effects that they experienced that was tied to the way that teachers were feeling and the way that the teachers presented the changes to them in class. Unfortunately, the emotional aspect of schooling is empirically and conceptually limited within the school reform literature (Levin, 2000; Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2003). It is, however, an area that demands increased attention, particularly in the era of large-scale reform. The following conversation between several students in one focus group is representative of comments that we heard in several schools about how teachers' attitudes affected their learning. Their teachers were not as available to them and they felt as if they had been left to sort things out on their own or, worse, teachers made it more difficult for students than it needed to be:

Last year I remember Math was so difficult because it was just so negative and it stressed me so much. The teacher was unhappy with it anyway because he was retiring that year. He had a whole different curriculum just for us, so he hated our class, like, so much. He was the most miserable person, and he would tell us every day that, "This the toughest Grade 10 curriculum I've ever seen and blah, blah, blah," and I just felt so small in it and I did so bad. But this year I have a happy teacher and she's always, like, really bubbly and makes it seem so much easier, it's just – it's – and it's in the same stuff and I'm just like why couldn't I get this last year? It's all because my attitude was so – I already felt like I couldn't do it, this year it just seems like so much easier, it's like – it's unbelievably easy, so . . .

Q: So, why was it you thought you couldn't do it?

Because he didn't give me a chance to even try really, at the beginning he basically told us that it was so difficult that I couldn't do it.

Yeah, it really doesn't help for the teacher to tell you that the curriculum is too hard for you. Like, I've had Math teachers, all my Grade 9 Math teacher said, "Oh, look, we're learning this today, and I used to teach this to Grade 11, so, I don't think you're going to get it." Okay, they would tell you this is stuff that Grade 11's would normally be doing or this is stuff that you normally didn't even teach in high school. It just really doesn't help.

On my first day of Math class the teacher goes, "This is a very hard course, you're not going to get half of it, but if you try maybe you'll pass." I was like, okay, this is fun.

Q: So, what does it do to you?

It really cuts you in half right at the beginning. It's like you have nothing to work with and it's already like you're already set in your mind like, I'm going to fail. It's totally a mind thing, like, you have to stay, like, if you, like, know you can do it or just think you can do it and you're encouraged, like, to keep trying at least, you're going to do, like, so much better. And really, like, it's only as difficult as you make it.

Students also told us that some teachers were putting them at a disadvantage by not teaching the new curriculum. This made it hard for students and for the next teacher who was expecting them to come in prepared:

In math class a lot of people who had the same teacher last year in Grade 9 are struggling a lot because he was supposed to teach them things that would bring them into Grade 10. So, now our new Math teachers have to re-tell everything we were supposed to learn last year because it was supposed to be in the new curriculum, he just didn't follow it at all. So, our teacher this year has to do what we were supposed to do in Grade 9, plus what we're supposed to be doing Grade 10. You can tell that that teacher really didn't care, he was just teaching us what he wanted to teach us and that's effecting us as we keep on going because we're going to have to re-learn and re-learn and re-learn.

Students lamented losing some of their favourite teachers who had been teaching for many years. Students in one focus group had this to say about losing their favourite teachers, and what it was like learning from new teachers:

Teachers are kind of a dying breed in our school.

Q: Teachers are what?

A dying breed.

Q: What does that mean?

Like, all the good old teachers are disappearing slowly. We lost two of my favourite teachers last year.

Q: Why? Did they retire?

Yeah, they both retired. They weren't actually that old, but they were sick of how things were going, they told me.

Student Engagement in Times of Turbulent Change

Q: So, tell me about those 'good old' teachers. What made them so good?

Like I was saying about before. They were really organized because they had all this experience. They knew exactly what problems kids usually had in the class, so, they would outline that, and help everyone through that. And they knew everything better.

INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL ACTIVITIES. Through our investigation, it became apparent that educational reform was having more than just an academic impact on students. Students discussed what school meant to them. They told us how the new reforms were influencing their involvement in school activities and they described the impact government reforms were having on student-teacher relationships.

We asked students in the focus groups to rate their involvement in school on a scale from one (low) to four (high) for two academic years, 1999/2000 and 2000/2001. Despite the fact that there hadn't been any extra-curricular activities sponsored by teachers (or in some cases, very few), the students indicated similar involvement in school in both years. Despite reporting a somewhat stable involvement in school, the students had much to say about how the reforms were having a negative impact on them at a personal level. Almost every student mentioned the loss of extra-curricular activities as effecting their sense of connection to the school:

I noticed last year students were in the school earlier in the mornings and they stayed later after schools because of these extra things, and this year I've noticed students start arriving at 8:45 and the school's pretty much empty by 3:30. Last year you'd have people lingering for an hour, two hours . . . doing extra things, hanging out with friends and stuff, they don't even do that anymore.

Overwhelmingly, students stated that the "extra's" in school, be it through sports or various clubs, provided an outlet to relieve the stresses of academic work. This finding is consistent with prior studies that highlight the importance and benefits of extracurricular activities (Bentley, 1998; Heath, 2000, 2002). As one student in our study put it:

I mean, extra-curricular activities were the one thing most people would look forward to. I think if they got stressed out in class or they felt they had too much to work on, they really had something to look forward to and something to do to get their mind off or just clear everything out.

Because there's been no sports or activities we've been getting a lot more stressed out, some of my friends . . . they're irritable and sometimes violent. I know my school marks have been dropping and school is starting to not be as fun. There's nothing to talk about. You just go to class to pass the class, home, homework. That's all.

The students riding the front of the wave of SSR in Ontario were caught in the "bad timing" and the difficult implementation of large-scale reform that included major changes in schools and programs coupled with funding cuts and reduced support. The political and labour strife will undoubtedly pass

but a cohort of students lost a significant piece in their lives. As one of them told us:

I think it's really important to have extra-curricular, because sports teach you about teamwork. Sure, you can learn about teamwork in the classrooms and stuff, with group work and that, but it just makes it more fun, and it makes school more fun. Like you look forward to going to school and to going to volleyball practice after school, and seeing your friends at volleyball, and having games. And it makes it more interesting. And it makes school more fun. So, it just gives people a reason to go to school. And when you look back on your high school years you'll say, "Oh, I remember this and this and this, and I remember how fun it was." And it's good to have those memories.

Discussion and implications

We invited students in this study to talk about their engagement with school and about the things that contribute to and diminish their engagement, especially as it might relate to SSR and the surrounding events. It is particularly important to consider how major reform efforts and the way that they are received affect students. Large-scale reform may be necessary and justified. Its implementation, however, influences the lives of particular young people. For students, this is their only time in secondary school. There is no second time around.

The data from this study suggest that SSR in Ontario was having a profound affect on students both personally and academically. At a time in their lives when they are particularly vulnerable, they were struggling to find their way without clear direction or support. They were making critical decisions about their post secondary destinations and teachers were unable to give them direction their choices or they had been given incorrect information about course levels and their ability to move from one level to another.

While teachers expressed concern for the students they felt were less able, our data suggest that the circumstances surrounding the implementation of SSR in Ontario were affecting students of all kinds. The students we talked to, many of whom were motivated and academically focused, were experiencing high levels of anxiety and felt that they had no one to turn to but each other.

On a personal level, many students felt lost and abandoned. Rather like shoppers on escalators trying to shop as the stairs move them on, students find themselves making impulsive (and sometimes rash) decisions or leaping off the moving treads, desperate for some stability. The particular irony in this scenario is that teachers, usually the buffers with life rings to haul them back when times get tough, were themselves so destabilized and self-preoccupied, they were unaware or incapable of acting in the students' interests.

Although the students indicated many kinds of loss during this first year of SSR, perhaps the most compelling loss was the loss of relationships with key teachers in their lives. In a study in England, Jean Rudduck and her colleagues (1996) found that relationships between teachers and students formed an important part of the optimum conditions for student learning. In particular, they drew attention to the messages that these interactions communicate to students about themselves as learners and as people, with certain interactions carrying strong negative or positive tones. These authors indicate that students are affected by things like teachers being available to talk about learning and schoolwork, allowing them to take responsibility when they seem to be ready, being sensitive to the tone and manner of their conversations with students (e.g., respectful, not humiliating), being fair and not pre-judging students, and making all students feel confident that they can do well and can achieve something worthwhile (Rudduck et al., 1996).

The implications of these findings for implementation of large-scale reform are profound. Student engagement with their schooling and with their school is an important precursor of students' success in school and beyond. It is a very powerful tool for capturing the imagination and energy of students and providing them with opportunities to practice and to internalize routines, attitudes and practices that will serve as a foundation for future learning. As Newmann (1989) said, "Engagement is the student's psychological investment in learning, comprehending and mastering knowledge or skills" (p. 34). This study has demonstrated that when students have to opportunity to articulate their perspectives on school reform, they provide valuable information for educators and policy makers. Through the process of involving students, students themselves have an opportunity to focus their own thinking (Cook-Sather, 2002) and think metacognitively and critically about their educational experiences. As a result of this experience, students need to not only feel more engaged but also more inclined to take additional responsibility for their education.

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Student Engagement in Times of Turbulent Change

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