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Valuing Children's Voices

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Abstract

This paper explores the voices of elementary children in public schools. Three databases were used including (a) interviews with 25 elementary students, (b) drawings and writings created by 225 third through sixth-grade students about their high stakes testing experiences, and (c) observations in two first-grade classrooms. The data demonstrate that elementary children have much to say about their overall school experiences, including their worries at school, their feelings of disconnect with their teachers, the lack of meaningful learning experiences, and their desire to be heard as unique individuals. These findings challenge educators to make changes in our American classrooms in order to best meet the needs of young children.

Keywords: elementary children's perceptions, elementary children's voices, child-centered practices

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Valuing Children's Voices

Historically, the design of schooling in the United States has been based on the premise that educators are the experts in determining what children need to learn, how learning should be taught, and how learning should be assessed. Children are called upon to respond to teachers' questions, but rarely to contribute to the overall management and decision making of classrooms and schools. While the notion of identifying and meeting the needs of children as unique learners has proliferated over the past quarter century, the assumption has been that *educators* must identify children's strengths and weaknesses, determine appropriate learning goals, and create instructional plans for moving toward those goals. Although educators and researchers have focused on individual children, individual student voice rarely influences the educational process and there is little evidence that teachers are listening to student voices as a means of meeting student needs (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2003; Scherff, 2005). Many educators have suggested that attending to student voice and creating educational environments that support student agency and empowerment within teaching/learning processes is necessary in meeting the needs of children (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2003; Cook-Sather & Schultz, 2001a, 2001 b; Kozol, 1991; Mitra, 2003; Oldfather, 1995a, 1995b).

There is little evidence that student perspectives are given consideration in educational decision-making. In studying middle and high school student perspectives on schools and school violence, Haselswertz and Lenhardt (2003) found that students had an "us-them" attitude about the adults in their schools. They did not feel respected by their teachers, and the only reported meaningful/respectful relationships students encountered in school were with peers. The students viewed programs and policies directed at increasing school safety as top-down in nature. They lacked trust and connection with teachers-- certainly not a condition that would lead students to

feel that they were safe and cared for within the school context (Haselswertz & Lenhardt, 2003). Similarly, Scherff (2005) found that students held the perspective that, for the most part, teachers did not care about students as individuals.

Educators who did include student voices in school reform efforts discovered they were able to create more positive and trusting school learning environments. Mitra (2003) found that when student voices were given a "place" in high school reform, it was possible for students and teachers to develop trust and decrease divisiveness. In this study, there were teacher-focused activities that made it possible for students to understand teacher views, and student-focused activities that allowed teachers to understand student perspectives. Mitra (2003, 2004) reported that by including student voices in school reform, students gained a sense of position and agency in schools, which in turn reduced the level of student alienation from schooling. Similarly, Bacon & Bloom (2000) asserted that student voice leads to high levels of responsibility in addressing school problems and designing solutions. Further, Rudduck and Demetriou (2003) suggested that including student voices in the school, as a learning community, could increase student engagement in learning.

Oldfather (1995b) found that when high school students were actively involved as educational co-researchers, they developed clear understandings of their own abilities, they developed solid understandings of themselves as learners and their own motivations for learning, and they gained perspective on their own capacities to help themselves and others. Similarly, Cook-Sather (2003) discovered that high school students had in-depth insights and sound impressions of their own learning and of learner differences. These student insights were used to assist teachers in making decisions about appropriate instructional support.

Most previous research on student voice and the potential impact of student voice on teaching, learning, and schooling has been conducted with middle and high school students. What about elementary students? Could the voices of elementary children be of value in improving their perceptions of school and schooling? Could the voices of elementary children provide information that could be useful in the teaching/learning process?

As a starting point in listening to the voices of elementary children, we revisited our own data, which was collected over the past 7 years. Our research often includes the voices of children and we wondered if there were common themes across studies. We revisited three of our own previous studies with the purpose of asking a new question,"What do elementary children have to say about their school experiences?"

Methods

Data Sources and Participants

Three data sources were revisited for this exploration. They will be identified as the Interview Study, the Drawing/Writing Study, and the Observation Study. The Interview Study involved interviews with 25 third and fourth graders. The Drawing/Writing Study used illustrations and texts created by 225 third through sixth graders. The Observation Study utilized field notes and teacher interview data related to observations of first-grade reading lessons in two different urban classrooms.

Interview Study

For this study, data were drawn from a study in which 33 students were interviewed about their perceptions about school (Triplett & Barksdale, 2003). In the original study, interviews were conducted with third through eighth grade students. For the current review, only the interviews with elementary learners (grades 3-4) were used, representing 25 children. The

children were from two different states and represented from a small city school, an urban school, and a rural school. Three interviews were conducted with each student over five months, with interviews lasting from 15-35 minutes each. The interview protocol included questions on: (a) current perceptions about school, (b) what students were learning, (c) what happened in school that helped students learn, (d) areas in which students were successful, (e) areas of in which students were less successful, (f) aspects of school that were stressful or worries about school, and, (g) aspects of school that help students deal with stresses and worries.

Drawing/Writing Study

As a second data source, we analyzed the drawings created by 225 third through sixth grade students, as well as the written explanations these students produced to explain their drawings (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005). The children were from two different states, and represented both rural and urban contexts. On the day following completion of state-mandated high stakes tests, the students were asked to, "Draw a picture about your recent testing experience." Next, the students were asked to write in response to the prompt, "Tell me about your picture." This method of data collection allowed for students' free responses without the possible biases of the researchers (which could have been revealed in interview or survey questions) influencing the responses (Wheelock, Bebell, and Haney, 2000).

Observation Study

The third data source included observational field notes about the interactions between elementary students and their first-grade teachers, as well as interviews with the teachers after the lessons. Two lessons were selected for inclusion in this paper. Student voices were identified as statements made and other verbal and nonverbal messages during the lessons. The observations were of a reading group with six students and a writing group with four students.

After observations of the lessons, an unstructured interview format was used to discuss the lessons with the teachers. One interview question was used to start the conversation: "Tell me what you thought about the lesson."

As a member check, the vignettes written based on the field notes and the interview transcriptions were shared with the teachers. The teachers were asked to identify any inaccuracies in the vignettes or transcripts and invited to recommend needed changes. Both teachers found the vignettes and interviews to be accurate and neither suggested changes.

Data Analysis

All of the data collected were qualitative in nature. For the Interview Study, audio-taped interviews were transcribed then segmented into units of meaning, with attention given to the preservation of context (Hycner, 1985). After segmenting the interviews, the units of meaning were grouped into categories sharing common characteristics. After organizing these data into categories, each category given a themed name that was representative of commonalties within the grouping (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

A constant comparative approach was used in the analysis of the data for the Drawing/Writing study. This inductive method was selected as appropriate for the analysis of student drawings, which represent a qualitatively different type of data from interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researchers examined the drawings to identify obvious recurring themes, noting the objects/people that were included. Next, we transcribed the statements made by the students and met to identify emerging themes from the transcripts. Finally, examinations were conducted to identify intersections between the themes identified in the drawings and the themes identified in student writings. Many of the children used the acronyms for the high stakes tests

given in their state in their statements. For confidentiality purposes, the acronym "HST" (for High Stakes Test) was used in the paper rather than the actual test acronyms.

In the Observation Study, for the purpose of exploring the voices of elementary children during lessons, field notes and interviews based upon observations of two literacy lessons were selected. The teacher interview was transcribed. The field notes were written as vignettes and matched with related teacher comments.

What are Elementary Students Saying About Their School Experiences?

The themes from each data source are presented separately, first the Interview Study, second the Drawing/Writing Study, and then the Observation Study.

Interview Study

The recurrent themes from interviewing 25 elementary students included: (a) current learning, (b) who helps with current learning, (c) areas of success, (d) areas of struggle, (e) connections between academic struggles and life away from school, (f) stresses and worries in school (other than testing), (g) stresses, worries, and thoughts about testing, (h) methods of dealing with stress and worries, (i) concerns about fairness in school, (j) concerns about teachers and instruction, (k) liking school.

Current learning

The children identified themes within specific subject areas they were learning in mathematics, science, and social studies, (for example, fractions, rocks and minerals, and the civil war). None of the students interviewed were able to identify what they were learning in reading, writing, or spelling. They discussed reading, writing, and spelling as subjects in which they "worked" and "practiced."

The participants provided many opinions about the subject areas such as, "I can't stand reading and writing, and that is what we do for almost the entire day, and it is just, well, I get so tired of it and you have to sit and do these stupid stories almost everyday and all these pages about where you have to answer all these questions about nothing. And we write every day and I don't like writing at all because it is just the same kind of stuff to write about and the same sentences and sentences, and I just wish we could do something interesting."

The children made very few statements were indicating that they liked or enjoyed particular subjects. Several children indicated that they liked reading, but when asked about their enjoyment of reading instruction, they had comments such as, "I mean, I like to read, like read books at home, but I don't like reading in school." One student liked "some of the stories" that she had read in school, and several children liked for their teachers to read to them. One said that math was his favorite subject, and another liked social studies.

Who helps with current learning

When these children were asked in interviews, "Who helps you with learning," in most cases, they named family members. This was an unexpected response, as the next intended interview question was to be, "Tell me about how your teacher helps you with learning." We expected that if students identified individuals other than teachers as helping them with learning, we would ask how these others helped. In 22 of the cases (66 interviews), teachers were not mentioned, so we did not ask the follow-up question about how teachers helped. Instead, we asked the students about how the identified individuals helped with learning. Typically, the students provided responses like, "She helps me do my homework every night," "We read stories and magazines together almost all days," and "Momma helps me study for every test, and we work and work until I know almost everything." A few students made comments such as, "My

dad is the best teacher because he helps me learn about how to do everything that you really need, hammering nails, climbing on ladders, and being safe and that; and we going fishing and he teaches me everything about all of the fish and how to catch them, and he helps me do everything that's hard. A handful of children mentioned coaches and Sunday school teachers as helping them learn.

Only three of the 25 children mentioned teachers as helping them learn. The same three children mentioned teachers in multiple interviews. In these three cases, the students named family members first and teachers later in the discussion. One of the children's comments was revealing in that it may provide insight into the rarity of the identification of teachers as helping students learn. This child said, "My teacher has too much, too many children and we have to do too many things to learn everyday so she doesn't really have time to help me very much, because, she does if she has time and I have something I didn't understand, if she has time she can tell me and explain and I can understand usually after that, and she's really nice, she's not mean if you don't understand and some teachers are, but she just helps me on sometimes." This statement demonstrates that this child clearly perceived the time constraints faced in day-to-day interactions with her teacher.

Areas of success

When students named areas of success such as reading, writing, math, and science, it was evident that most understood success as being reflected in grades. For instance, a fourth grader said, "I know I'm good at science because I always get an A, every nine weeks, but I'm not so good at anything else." The children felt that their success in different subject areas came naturally, as in, "I just think it's easy," and "I've always been good at writing." There were few indications that the children viewed successes as related to their efforts.

Areas of struggle

Nineteen of the twenty-five students identified mathematics as the most troublesome subject area. A fourth-grade male found math to be much more challenging than it had been in the earlier years. He said, "I was good at math in first and second grade and I really got it and good grades, too, you know? But now I can't remember it all and I'm always getting something wrong even when I thought I knew it, so I think it is really hard this year and I keep getting a C." Several students noted difficulties in reading and writing; none indicated that they struggled with science or social studies.

In several cases, the children indicated confusions about their success between home and school. Another fourth-grader said, **"**I like reading at home and I read to my mom and we talk about it all, what it was about, and I don't have no problems understanding or saying the words, so my mom thinks I can read good, but I'm no good at it in school and I always get a C, no matter how hard I try, so I guess you could say that it isn't a very good subject for me, and I don't like it in school either."

Connections between academic struggles and life away from school

There were many instances in which children made connections between their struggles in school and their lives away from school. In a rather impassioned and detailed manner, a fourth grader stated, "I don't think the teachers understand what life is like for kids. I'm slow, I just can't do things quickly and I have to read every word and think about every question and if I rush, I get it wrong and I don't like that … We get up, and get dressed and eat breakfast, and that takes a long time if there's a few kids, and wait for the school bus, and then ride, and we are busy at school all day, and then we have to go to the baby sitter after the bus, and there's a whole bunch of different kids there. You can't do homework with all that going on, and then Momma

comes and gets us and while she fixes the dinner, we have to do the chores, and then we eat dinner and everybody has to take a bath, and before or after your bath, you can have a few minutes for homework, but I'm always tired and then it's time to go to bed, and a new day. I almost never finish the homework, and I get bad grades and get in trouble, and I tell Ms. (teacher) I don't have time, but she doesn't understand, doesn't believe me, or something. She just gives too much of homework to do, like she thinks everyone gets home at four o'clock and has nothing to do but homework until they go to bed, and I really wish she could understand, but my momma tells her, and it still, we still get so much homework. I want to do it, and I want to get good grades, but she doesn't understand I'm trying as hard as I can and doing all that I can with the time. I can't watch TV at all in the week, and I haven't really been able to watch it in about two years, except in the summer since the first of third grade because of my grades and there isn't any way to just make more time for yourself, you know?"

Stresses and worries in school (other than testing)

Topics for worries in school included: tornadoes and hurricanes, school violence, having to repeat a grade, competitions in school, bullies, report cards, and terrorism. Most children mentioned numerous worries. For instance, in a representative statement, a fourth grader said, "I worry about a lot of stuff, like guns and shooting, like kids who bring guns to school and might shoot some other kids, and I'm afraid that could happen to us, and stuff like kids who are mean to me and say mean things to me and hit, sometimes, and I'm scared they would bring guns to school. And it sort of scares me sometimes about my report card and what I'm going to get, and whether I would pass or not, because if you don't pass, you have to do the whole year all over again and everybody knows about it. I worry about a whole lot of stuff."

Stresses, worries, and thoughts about testing

Twenty-one of the 25 participants brought up worries about testing, and nineteen of these students discussed this topic in all three interviews. The focus of student worries about testing centered on whether or not they would pass, and what would happen if they did not pass. A third grader stated, "The HST test, that is the worst thing that happens in school. It is awful and I worried and worried and my mom and dad, they worried a lot and we talked about it every day and I knew, I could tell Ms. (teacher) was worried 'cause everything we did, every single day, she would be saying something about remembering it for the HST test. I thought I would probably throw up in the middle of the test, it just seemed like it made me sick and now I'm scared to know if I passed or not, 'cause if I'm not, then everyone will think I'm so dumb." Similarly, another child said, "If you don't pass the HST, you have to fail, fail the whole grade and be in third grade again next year, and I know that this is for, even if you have passing grades, they just don't matter, so I worry every day and every night, all the time, even in the summer, about if I can pass the HST."

Methods of dealing with stress and worries

Very few children were able to identify strategies they could use to help themselves deal with or address their worries. Their ideas for dealing with worries included reading books, and breathing and counting. Most of the children felt that nothing could be done to alleviate worries.

Concerns about fairness in school

Many students found aspects of schooling to be unfair, and they expressed frustrations about the unfairness of school. There were discussions of unfairness such as whole classes being punished for the misbehavior of a few children, having too much homework, silent lunches, not having chances to socialize with other children, and grading methods.

There were also several comments about the unfair nature of school in general. For

instance, a third grade student said, **"**I wish I didn't have school. I mean, you get to see your friends, but it is just so miserable all day, just sitting there, doing this and writing that and reading this and talking about this. I really don't think it's fair, what they make us do; I know, I understand that all of the kids have to learn, but we don't really learn very much, we just do work and write pages and give answers all day, and we aren't learning anything. I like learning and I wouldn't complain this if, about school, if I was learning new things every day, but I don't learn anything new most days and I really don't think it is fair that we have to spend so long sitting there just doing things when we aren't learning nothing."

Concern about teachers

Over half of the children felt that their teachers did not understand their struggles as learners. Again, grades were featured as being very important. A third grader reported, "I don't think it is fair, because if you do all the work and try hard, and I try to know everything she tells us, and do the homework and follow the rules, why can't I just get good grades?"

Liking school

Although most of the themes in these interview data from third- and fourth-graders had negative connotations about children's experiences in school, the students overwhelmingly stated that they liked school. Every child stated in at least one interview (some in all three interviews) that they liked school. In a number of cases, this comment was added at the end of a negative comment about school. For instance, "I really hate all of that worrying about the HST's, but I still like school," "My teacher doesn't seem very, like, she doesn't really understand, and she doesn't want to hear what I think about stuff mostly, but I still like her and I know she loves us and I like school," I can't hardly stand reading time every day and it is so boring and has too many skills, but I know I would, it's supposed to help me and everybody grown has to, you

know, read, so it's like okay; I mean, I hate reading, but school is okay; I like school."

Some of the children made comments indicating that they had developed their own perspectives on liking school. One fourth-grader said, "For kids, school is the same as your work and you have to go to school to get sort, into a way so that you're used to, you have to go there every day and staying for a long time like at work and some might've not liked their job, not everything about their job, but you've got to find something to like so you just won't hate everything and hate it all the time. So we go to school just like that, and you have to find some things that you like at school, something you can like about it, or if you don't, you'll be mad and mean all the time, and I do that; I find things that I can like about school, and so I can like it, like the kids and the teachers, they're good to be around most of the time. It's okay." Another said, "I know it is all of my own good, and if I don't like stuff we do in school, my dad says it's too bad but I have to do it so I'll grow up knowing what I'm supposed to know, and I don't want to be one of those stupid people who have to work at the Wal-Mart, so I better just learn and do whatever they tell me and try to like it."

Drawing/Writing Study

The themes that emerged during the Drawing/Writing Study included: (a) emotions, (b) the culture of testing, (c) the role of the teacher, (d) adult language, (e) student metaphors, (f) isolation, (g) fire, (h) power/politics, and (i) passing or failing.

Emotions

The expression of emotions was common in this study. In their writing, children used words like "mad," "confused," "frustrated," "tired," "bored," "sweating," "sleepy," and "happy." The most repeated word was "nervous." Although many of the children did not know how to spell "nervous," they wanted to get the concept across. Spellings for nervous included,

"nervios," "nurves," "nurvse," "nerves," "nirvis," "nervise," "nerves," "nervos," "nervour," "nervious," and "nervous."

In the drawings, there were many question marks over heads and cartoon balloons containing terms like "Help!" We noted that the children had drawn the mouths of the children in their pictures with great care, and across the 225 drawings, there were no standard cup-like mouths. The children had intentionally drawn unhappy and angry mouth shapes.

Figure 1: Drawing of unhappy 4th grade test taker.

Although these were not representative, a couple of the drawings depicted depression, and in one case, a student wrote that he wanted to "kill self."

Figure 2: Drawing of depressed 3rd grade test taker.

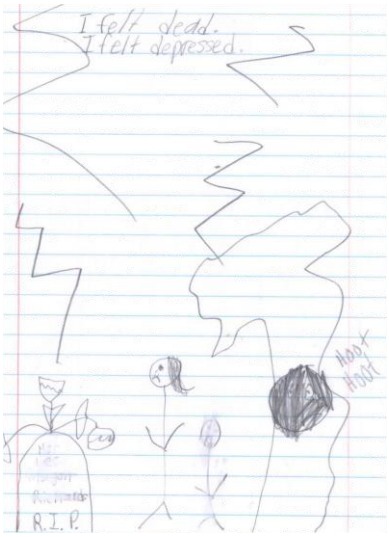
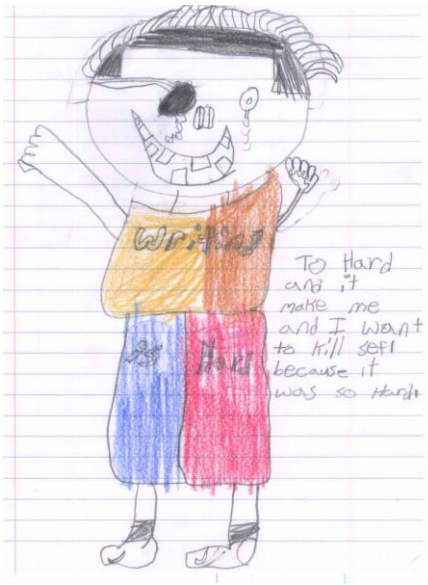


Figure 3: Drawing of 3rd grade test taker with suicidal thoughts.

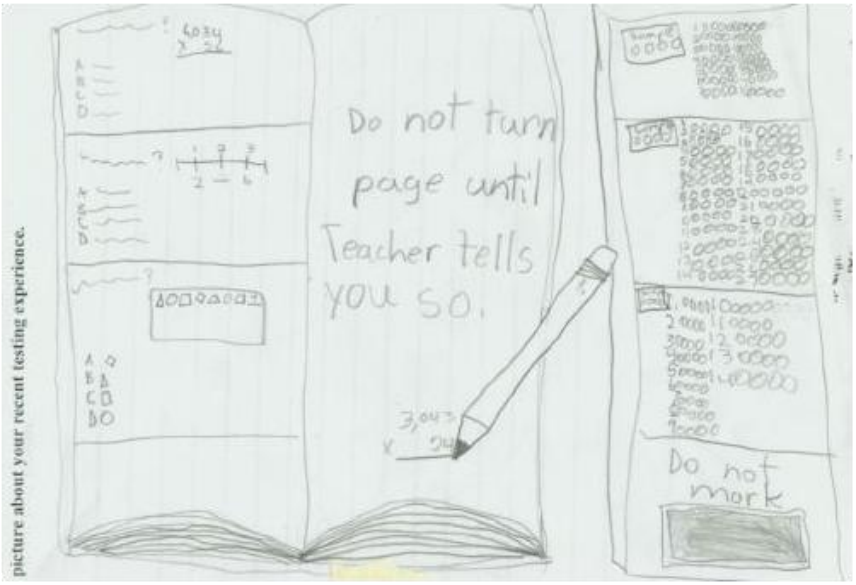


The terms "happy" or "glad" occurred in 18 of the 225 pictures/writings. Students indicated that they were happy when the tests were over, happy about ice cream parties after the tests, and happy about being able to chew gum and take off their shoes during the tests.

Culture of Testing

Student drawings demonstrated that these students were well versed in the culture of testing. Many drawings featured desks upon which bubble sheets, test booklets, and pencils were placed.

Figure 4: Drawing of 5th grader depicting the implements of the testing experience.



Teacher Role

Although teachers were in the classrooms in which students took their high stakes tests, teachers were surprisingly absent from the drawings. Only 16 children included teachers in their drawings or writings. When teachers were discussed in student writings, there was little substantive information about teachers. For instance, a sixth grader wrote, "The work was hard & you had to think. The book was very hard to read. Some words I didn't understand. The sun was beating on my head. Very bored and tired. Mr. [teacher] had wrote work on the broad after HST. I felt very spiced up. Very mad. And sad." In the drawings, there were teachers in both supportive and non-supportive roles.

Figure 5: Less supportive teacher during testing.

Figure 6: More supportive teacher provides student with bubble gum during testing.

Adult Language

In some cases, children used terms in their drawings and writings adult language rather than children's language. For instance, one student drew a picture of a stick figure holding a large sign that said "Fuck HST." Several students wrote that, "HST's suck."

There were also cases in which the adult language used did not express opinions. Statements were made such as, "The picture is about me finding the proof and circling the key words and rereading the story." These terms were non-typical of the language used by students in the study, and had the marks of language repeated from teachers or parents.

Student Metaphors

Several students created metaphors for their high stakes testing experience. For instance, a third-grade child said that taking the HST was like a "war between the question marks and the light bulbs" in his mind. His picture was a detailed depicture of this metaphor.

Figure 7: Drawing of a "war between the question marks and the light bulbs."

Isolation

The most recurrent pattern in the analysis of drawings was a picture of an individual child sitting at a desk on which testing materials were drawn, surrounded by white space. This was the case in 125 (55%) of the drawings. In the most cases, the children and desks were very small and in the center of the paper. No children used the words "alone" or "isolation" in their writings, yet, the number of drawings of this kind implied that the children felt isolated or alone during their testing experiences.

Figure 8: Sample 1 of student isolation during testing.

Figure 9: Sample 2 of student isolation during testing.

Fire

Fifteen students drew and wrote about fire or burning. This occurred at all grade levels and in both states. In most cases, these drawings included test booklets on fire with people standing by cheering. Students made statements about their drawings such as, "I hate test and I am sitting near a fire with a lot of tests in it burning."

Figure 10: Sixth-grader's depiction of burning high stakes tests.

Power/Politics

Several student writings about their drawings had political implications, or in some way reflected the notion that testing has a political function. For example, one student wrote, "What expressed on the back of this is nothing but pure hatred for the HST because I really don't need no dumb test telling if I get to go to another grade. Because when you are nervous you crazy things. And if I flunk, who fault is that. Not mine. It's George Bush's. PS I would this war blows up all the HST tests."

There were also statements that reflected children's understandings of the fact that their test scores could eventually have an impact on their lives as adults. A fourth grader said, "That is me before the HST Testing. I was very nevios because if you don't pass you can't go to a good collage. So you could be the guy at the Burger King drive through."

Pass/Fail

Many students expressed concern about whether they would pass or fail their HST. A fifth grader wrote, "My picture is about me and my tests. Well I am very nerveous about my

HST testing. I don't think I can pass my test. When I read in the passages when it asks you some questions I sweat all the time when important test are on the line. Well I think the HST testing was hard."

Observation Study

The following vignettes were written based on field notes from observations in two different first-grade classrooms. In each case, observations were followed by an interview with the teacher about the observation. In the first vignette, the teacher was working with a group of six students in a reading group. In the second vignette, another teacher was working with a writing group of four students.

Vignette 1:

Classroom observation

Teacher: "Now, give me your vowel cards. We are going to work on skills today."

Several shoulders lower. Children hand cards to teacher.

Teacher: "Get your workbooks out."

Students: [Loud groan; *seems to come from all 6.* Two boys stretch out over the table, laying their heads down.]

Teacher: "Now sit up and pay attention. You need to open your workbook to page 95."

Male student: Lifts head and says: "Can't we read that bear story again?"

Another student: "Yeah, we liked that one. It was the best."

Teacher: "You have to take the test on this book soon and you need to be able to do the skills. Now, find page 95."

The children slowly begin looking through the workbook for page 95. One child leaves to go to the restroom, then another. The others whisper as they wait for the return of the two classmates. Five minutes later, the group begins to work in the workbooks.

Segment of interview with the teacher

Teacher: "Every time we do it [the workbook], it's like all I have to say is the word 'workbook' and they just deflate, like I stick pins in all of them at once."

Interviewer: "What do you think about that?"

Teacher: "I hate it, of course, because it is their reading group and I want them all to be excited about reading, and it seems to me that if they learn to hate what happens in the reading group, they are going to learn to hate reading, and I can't stand that, but I don't feel that there is any choice because we have all of these books, three hardcover books, all of these *[she points to a shelf at the three different books]*, and they have to take a test at the end of every book. If they don't pass the tests, which are mostly skills, then I haven't done my job and they are considered not ready for second grade. And I have to start getting them ready for HST testing, even though this is only first grade."

Vignette 2

Classroom observation

Teacher: "All right. Today we are going to work on your Mother's Day letters." *Teacher hands out folders and gives each child a sheet of blank lined paper.* "I've gone through your letters and made some corrections, so today, I want you to copy your letters over again, very neatly and use the correct spellings. These are the letters you will take to your mothers, and after you finish copying yours, you can draw a picture to go with it."

Child 1: "Do I have to copy mine? I only got one thing wrong."

Teacher: "Don't you want it to be nice for your mother?"

Child 1: "My mom don't care if there's only one thing wrong, an' I hate copying. Can't I just draw a picture?"

Child 2: "My mom don't care either, she likes it the way it is."

None of the children have started copying. They are all waiting and watching the teacher.

Teacher: "This is special, for your mothers for Mother's Day, and just this once, let's make these letters as beautiful and perfect as we can make them."

Child 1: "My hand hurts, cause we been sitting and writing all morning. I don't want to copy."

Child 3: "If you want it perfect, why don't you do it on the computer?"

Teacher: "We don't have time for all of you to do your letters on the computer. Now stop arguing with me, and get to work."

The children all slowly pick up their pencils and start writing.

Teacher: "That's good, but remember to leave a nice space between words."

Child 3 has written a couple of words and begins erasing something. Her paper tears.

Child 3: "I messed up. I need another paper."

Teacher: "Okay, here's another sheet of paper, but go slow and pay attention to your work. We need to get this finished." *Hands Child 3 another sheet of paper.*

Child 4: "I got mine wrong, too. See, I wrote a different word."

Teacher: *Voice louder, in strict tone:* "What is wrong with you all today? This is just copying, and you can do it if you will pay attention.

Child 1: "But we hate copying."

Teacher: *Still using loud voice:* "I don't care if you hate copying. I really want you to be able to show your mothers what a good job you can doing on your writing. You have all improved so much, and you have written sweet letters. Let's show your mother's how well you can do.

At this point, the children all start writing again. The teacher watches over them, making suggestions as they write. The children are silent and "on task." The copying activity itself takes 15 minutes.

Teacher: "You've all done a very good job and I'm proud of you. Now you can go to your seats and draw a picture to go with your letters. Put your new letters back in the folders, and we can throw away the old ones.

The children follow the instructions, putting the new letters in the folders and handing the folders to the teacher. Child 1 picks up his draft letter and starts shredding it, then balls up the shreds. Children 2, 3, and 4 start shredding their drafts.

Teacher: "What are you all doing? I just told you to throw your old letters away. We don't need all of this tearing and carrying on.

Child 1: "I hate these stupid letters."

All four children take their shredded, balled up letters to the garbage can and drop them, then go to their seats and sit down.

Segment of interview with the teacher

Teacher: "This group is just so active and so social, and I knew that if I gave them the letters to copy at their seats, they either wouldn't do it, or they wouldn't do it right. This is my lowest group, and they are very uncooperative all the time, but I didn't think they would do it in front of you. No matter what I ask them to do in reading or writing, they have some argument about it, and they know how it's going to end; they know they will end up doing what I told them to do to

begin with, but they just have to argue. If they had things their way, first grade would be nothing but watching videos, socializing, and eating."

Interviewer: "It was obviously important to you that these children copied their letters correctly. Tell me about that."

Teacher: "All of the other kids have already done theirs. I already had 14 folders with nice looking, correct letters in them, and just these four with lots of mistakes, and very messy letters. I know they don't like to copy, and I know they don't learn anything from copying. And it's not like we copy things everyday, but on Friday, I wanted everyone to be able to take home a nice Mother's Day letter with a picture, and I don't like the idea of having most of the class bring home really pretty letters, and these four take home messy, incorrect ones. I mean, what they said is right. Some of their mothers wouldn't care one way or the other, and some of their mothers probably won't pay one bit of attention to these letters, but I think the children need to learn; I know that some of these mothers don't deserve a lot of appreciation because they don't even take good care of their kids and send them to school clean, and that's why I have to provide snack for so many of them every morning, because they haven't had breakfast, and they get too hungry. But still, I know they love their mothers, and have appreciation for them no matter what the circumstances, so I thought they would be okay with this. You just don't know, it's really hard to know what to do sometimes, because most of the other kids were actually motivated by this. They wrote gorgeous letters, with lots of sentiment, surprising really for first grade, and they copied them beautifully, with not a complaint, and they're excited about taking them home and giving them to their mothers on Sunday. But these other four, they are just a mess. I don't know what to do with them."

Interviewer: "So, were you pleased with the letters they wrote today?"

Teacher: "They're okay. These children just don't care about things like this, and they still have some mistakes, but this is as good as it's going to get with these kids."

The two first-grade vignettes demonstrate that the children had a great deal to say about their learning experiences, both verbally and nonverbally. In both cases, the children objected to what they had been asked to do by their teachers, and they assured that their objections were made clear for their teachers. These particular vignettes were selected for this analysis in part because the voices of the children were so articulate; in other lessons in which students did not object to teacher requests, there was little "voice" of this kind and the children simply performed tasks identified by the teachers. It was also clear that both teachers heard the objections of the children and decided to follow through with their own plans and require that the children completed the assigned tasks.

Discussion

At the onset, we asked the question, "What are elementary students saying about their school experiences?" Across these data, there is evidence that elementary students have much to say about their school experiences. Through interviews, drawings, writings, and classroom interactions, elementary children made some very strong statements.

Children worry at school

These studies, conducted across the past decade, reveal that children worry a lot at school. Most children reported worrying about grades, the consequences of failing, or failing their end-of-grade tests. Most of the children reported worrying before, during, and after their end-of –grade tests. Specifically, they worried about state-mandated high stakes tests. In the Drawing/Writing study, students' perceptions were the most detailed. The students reported worry, anger, nervousness, boredom and even suicidal thoughts. The most prevalent theme about

testing was that of isolation, with more than half the students creating depictions of themselves sitting alone at desks surrounded by white space—all alone.

From a psychological perspective, we know that in order to feel safe and allow for maximum learning, children need to have their belonging needs fulfilled and stress should be minimal (Bradburn, 1969; Ellis, 2004; Grant, Compas, Stuhlmacher, Thurm, McMahon, & Halbert, 2003; Sherman, 2004). These data reflect high levels of stress and worry in elementary children, a condition that might be lessened if children knew that their voices were heard and valued. Sherman states, " . . . through responsiveness to every student, teachers can nurture the unique personal qualities students possess and help move them toward deeper understandings of both the world around them and the universe within them" (2004, 24). Unfortunately, many children we interviewed also worried that their teachers did not really understand them and their life situations.

Children feel disconnected from their teachers

In these studies, children did not report experiencing responsiveness from their teachers. Instead, the elementary students reported feeling disconnected from their teachers. Much like the middle school and high school students reported in previous studies (Haselswertz & Lenhardt, 2003; Scherff, 2005), the elementary students in this study reported feeling alienated from their teachers. The students did not think that teachers understood their lives away from school, and over half of the children indicated that their teachers did not understand their struggles as learners. Several students indicated that they had high levels of success when working at home with parents, but this success did not follow them into the classroom. Most students identified family members as helping them with learning – not teachers.

The elementary students in this study reported that their teachers were too busy and too worried about high-stakes tests to consider their needs as individual children. Even a child who thought her teacher was really nice also noticed, "My teacher has too much, too many children, too many things to do everyday so she doesn't really have time to help me very much…" Even during testing, when teachers could possibly play a positive role in alleviating anxiety, most children portrayed themselves as all alone, with no teacher present.

Learning opportunities are not meaningful

As a fourth grader so poignantly commented, "I understand that all of the kids have to learn, but we really don't learn very much, we just do the work and write pages and answers all day, and we aren't learning anything new most days…" Children across the elementary grades reported that most of their school activities do not seem meaningful. Children reported that they would *like* to learn, read, and write if they were allowed to pursue something interesting. Even the teachers in the observation study wrestled with the lack of meaningfulness in their worksheets and writing practice. Likewise, children in the interview study reported boring review activities for many months before the end-of-grade tests and experiencing "wasted time" during the tests. These elementary students seemed to understand that a testing focus can lead to drill and skill practice, instead of momentous learning opportunities.

Children want an opportunity to be listened to

These studies not only demonstrated that elementary children have a great deal to say; there was evidence that they welcome opportunities to say it. While collecting data for the interview study, an unexpected phenomenon was that the children began to jump up and run to the researchers as they entered classrooms, saying, "Are you going to take me today? Please, take me." And at the time of the final interview, children expressed sorrow, making statements

like, "I wish you would keep coming here and talking to me 'cause you're the only person who's ever really, really like talked to me at school, and I think, I probably need somebody to talk to me and listen, really listen, like you." It was difficult to end data collection when the young participants were begging for more. These children truly wanted someone to hear and value their voices in their school. Likewise, in the drawing/writing study, many children were very reflective and unyielding in openly sharing their angst about high-stakes testing. They chose to use strong words and strong images to relay their thoughts and feelings—some even erasing holes in their paper until they chose the perfect word to describe their thoughts or the perfect mouth to portray their feelings.

There are numerous calls in the literature for the inclusion of student voices in the classroom and in schools as a whole (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2003; Cool-Sather & Schultz, 2001a, 2001 b; Kozol, 1991; Mitra, 2003; Oldfather, 1995a, 1995b; Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003). Previous studies have shown that when student voice is valued and used to develop respect and rapport between teachers and students, it can lead to significant school improvements; however, these studies were conducted with middle and high school students (Bacon & Bloom, 2000; Cook-Sather, 2003; Haselswertz & Lenhardt, 2003; Mitra, 2003; Oldfather, 1995b). This current look at elementary students naturally leads to questions about the viability of valuing elementary children's voices in the day-to-day instructional life of the schools.

To what degree do elementary students understand what is best for them? When the children in the observation study asked their teacher to allow them to reread a story rather than completing workbook pages, did they know what was best for themselves? Did the interviewed children who felt that their teachers did not understand their struggles as learners have accurate perceptions? What is the meaning of the fact that nearly all of the 225 drawings looked sad or

angry? Could it be possible to test children in such a way as to result in drawings of happy faces? If we are to value children's voices in elementary classrooms, how do we know what to value, and what to hear but perhaps not value? We must assume that there are limits on what elementary children know about what is best for them and what would best meet their needs. How could elementary schools best provide "places" for students to voice their thoughts and for teachers to respond to these voices? Can the positive findings involving valuing student voices in middle schools and high schools be replicated in elementary schools? We are left with many questions to ponder and many children yet to listen to.

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