

Hey, What Do Kids Know, Anyway?

The Case for Student Perspective Surveys

So, you're a teacher – maybe having been in the profession for decades, or perhaps you are new, with only a year or two under your belt. How do you know if you are reaching your students? How do you know if they are learning lessons for life, or just memorizing enough to pass the next test? Then again, there is the subject of your classroom management and presentation style. How do you know whether what you are doing is effective and efficient? We seldom ever get a chance to observe other teachers' classes. Occasionally we may have professional development that allows us a peek into another teacher's world, or a conference at which we see other's facilitating learning.

It is common practice in college for professors to ask you to complete a course evaluation at the end of the semester. Some professors even count a completed course evaluation as five extra points toward your total grade, making it worth the effort to complete the anonymous online evaluation. But this practice is rarely employed in pre-college education. Now there are public web forums such as “Rate My Teachers” (<https://ratemyteachers.com/>) and “Rate My Professors” (<https://www.ratemyprofessors.com/>), where students can give kudos or lemons to teachers and professors they have encountered.

There is of course, the classroom visitation/observation by the principal or vice principal which can be planned or a surprise visit. I was fortunate early on to learn how to ignore observation visits. During clinical practice, as a teacher candidate in 9th grade biology, I received a surprise visitation. I briefly looked up to see two adults enter my classroom, assuming

their obvious intent, as they stood to the side of the class. I zoned them completely out of my vision and kept solidly focused on my students. Later, my master teacher told me that the two guests had been the school principal and the district superintendent. It was a good thing I ignored their presence or I might have become self-conscious and fumbled my presentation.

The supervisory observation is usually followed by a written report placed in your mail box with pros and cons about your classroom style and presentation. I am quite used to being critiqued, and yet, like many teachers, I find myself becoming self-defensive and dread reading the report. Even though my evaluations are usually quite positive, I still fight the urge to defend any negative finding rather than look to it as a way of becoming a better teacher. Intellectually I know my vice-principal (a good friend) always means to support and build me up as a teacher, yet I still fall into that defensive thought trap. I say all this up front as a personal confession, to commiserate with what your reactions to critiques might be, because I'm heading into deep water now regarding teacher evaluations.

More frequently now, states and school districts are developing teacher performance evaluations using multiple types of input. Parents, students and colleagues, in addition to administration, are getting their say into your competency as a teacher. Dretzke, Sheldon, & Lim (2015), (in their study entitled *What Do K-12 Teachers Think about Including Student Surveys in Their Performance Ratings?*), went about exploring teacher reactions to giving students a forum for commenting on their skills and classroom management. They observed that "student ratings could provide reliable and valid information regarding teacher performance. They also noted that a strong argument for the use of student perception data is based on students having more direct and extensive experience with a teacher than principals or other potential evaluators," (Dretzke, Sheldon, & Lim, 2015). Indeed, students are the ones with the greatest amount of experience

with each teacher, and one would think they would be the best ones to share their perspective. But when asking teachers about the idea of getting input from their students as part of their performance evaluation, there was much hesitancy:

“This study investigated K-12 teachers’ opinions about the use of student surveys as a component of a teacher evaluation system. Surveys were administered to teachers at the beginning of the school year and again in the spring. Analyses of teachers’ responses on the fall survey indicated tentative support for the inclusion of student feedback in teacher performance ratings, as well as some uncertainty. Teachers of lower elementary grades were more skeptical than teachers of other grade levels regarding the use of student survey data and were more doubtful about their students’ ability to distinguish between effective and ineffective teaching behaviors. Comparisons of fall and spring responses showed a consistent decrease in teachers’ support for the use of student surveys regardless of grade level taught. In addition, teachers were more skeptical than principals with respect to both the validity of student survey data and the usefulness of student feedback for improving teaching performance” (Dretzke, Sheldon, & Lim, 2015).

As the year progressed, teachers became less willing to have students comment on their performance. It is reasonable to ask why this might be? One would hope that teachers and students would become more connected as the school year progressed; that they would trust each other more and learn how to enjoy each other’s company in wholesome, productive ways. But, perhaps what is happening is that the students have found more reasons to dislike their teachers and having fewer reasons to trust them. Subsequently, they might want to use a student perception survey to “get back” at a teacher they think has treated them unfairly. The

researchers “suggested that teachers (would) likely become more invested in student surveys as a component of teacher evaluation when they see their summary feedback reports and realize their potential value for enhancing teaching effectiveness” (Dretzke, Sheldon, & Lim, 2015). Yet they found “two main challenges related to the use of student surveys in teacher evaluation systems. One of these challenges was gaining teacher buy-in and support. Interviewees often reported that teachers expressed initial skepticism and resistance to student surveys related to their perceptions that student surveys were simply popularity contests. The second challenge was making effective use of student feedback to improve teacher practice. The researchers noted the importance of showing connections between implementation of a student survey and improving teacher practice” (Dretzke, Sheldon, & Lim, 2015).

We as teachers tend to be self-isolating. We think, “close the door and let me teach things my way.” When observers walk in the room, we may tend to change some things we’re doing for the benefit of getting a good report, then return to old practices when the observer leaves the room. In this we react no differently than some of our students, who are well-behaved when they are being watched, and revert to distracting behavior when the teacher looks away. This is by way of saying, we are all human, and want our peers to think the best of us, but to allow students a say on whether we get a promotion or even keep our jobs, is beyond comprehension.

Students and Teachers:

To help understand how students think about this, I conducted an anonymous survey of my 8th grade classes. Initially, I presented the definitions of two words:

Inefficient -

not achieving maximum productivity; wasting or failing to make the best use of time or resources.

"the government was both inefficient and corrupt"

synonyms: ineffective, ineffectual, inefficacious, incompetent, inept, incapable, unfit, unsuitable, unskilled, unskillful, inexpert, amateurish;

("inefficient - Google Search," n.d.)

Ineffective -

not producing any significant or desired effect.

"the legal sanctions against oil spills are virtually ineffective"

synonyms: unsuccessful, nonsuccessful, unproductive, fruitless, profitless, unprofitable, abortive, failed, futile, purposeless, worthless, useless, ineffectual, inefficient, inefficacious, inadequate, vain, unavailing, to no effect;

("ineffective - Google Search," n.d.)

Then I asked the students, in all their school experiences, "have you ever had a teacher you would classify as inefficient or ineffective." Immediately, most of the hands went up in the room. A few students felt that all their teachers had been good, and did not participate in the survey. I received responses from 64 students with varying answers.

(Following are summary statements of student thoughts):

1) Ineffective teachers are not organized and lose track of what is supposed to be happening in class. They don't have their supplies and waste time finding them.

- 2) Teachers hand out papers for students to complete without the teaching required for the task. They expected you to figure it out on your own.
- 3) They are mean, rude, get mad easily, doesn't listen to students, won't allow students to ask questions, and focus on what students do wrong.
- 4) Teacher makes slow progress, not productive, unskillful, amateurish, makes potentially interesting topics sound boring, never explained things thoroughly, give multiple projects at one time.
- 5) They don't get to know the students, act as if they don't want to be at school, talk too much, don't enjoy teaching or the subject, watch too many videos, give too much homework, don't have control of the classroom.
- 6) They are not engaging and don't put time and energy into the class. They keep telling stories that have nothing to do with class.
- 7) The teacher hated kids with ADD, (like me), too many tests and quizzes, gets off-topic and is arrogant.
- 8) (And lastly, my favorite of all) Teacher of special education students with hyperactivity symptoms, giving unlimited access to candy without telling the parents.

Let's ask that question again, "What do kids know, anyway?" By reading the responses to the survey question, it would appear they know quite a lot. Children are very aware of what is happening around them and of the adults in their world. Another resource for viewing and understanding teachers' classroom methodologies, is looking at YouTube videos they post sharing their "wisdom" and tips for classroom management. These are considered veteran teachers who should know how things work best, and I considered many of their suggestions as

positive contributions to the field of education. Nonetheless, there were several suggestions, or reports of personal behavior which I found hazardous or ill advised.

One teacher of a second-grade class uses a “line” with her students, telling them that there is a hidden camera somewhere in the classroom that is recording their behavior all the time. “Some of you may disagree with this hack, and you may not want to implement it in your own classroom. It does involve lying to your students, but if you really think about it there are a lot of things we do lie to our students about. It’s always recording and if they are misbehaving and we have to pull the tape, we have to go up to the front office and get their parents in to review the tape with us.” (Pocketful of Primary. (n.d.). *10 Easy Classroom Management Hacks*, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfyBApCF41c>). The teacher, convinced that a student is lying to her, takes the child out into the hallway and asks “if we look at the camera recording, what are we going to see?” Most of the time, the student confesses, claims the teacher. This is truly ironic; the teacher is using a lie to ferret out a lie. So, where does being a good role model for students fit in to this picture. The fact is, that the truth of the camera in the room will come out one day. The kids will talk to their parents about the camera, or the subject of the camera will come up in a conversation with administration. And the net result will be kids who realize they have been lied to by someone important in their lives, and will likely cause them to question authority figures for the rest of their lives, not knowing for sure whether they have been told a lie.

Another teacher in an all-boys high school is shooting a water pistol at students to get their attention and writing on their hands and face with an erasable marker when they misbehave. He threatens them with, “Do that again and I’m literally going to write on your face” (Real Rap with Reynolds, n.d.). Alternately he may use a bull horn to get their attention, or address them

with something like, “Good morning mutants, I need everyone’s attention.” No doubt he gets their attention. He comments, “By saying something ‘off color,’ it catches kids’ attention and helps you get into your lesson faster” (Real Rap with Reynolds, n.d.). Mr. Reynolds has many other tips which are positive, but I would think that any negative teacher contact that physically touches a student or calls them unflattering names should be avoided for many reasons.

The bottom line to this is that students are aware of the difference between a good and honest teacher and one that is inefficient, ineffective or dishonest. We would do well as teachers, to engage in some soul-searching, because what we say and do with children during these delicate and sensitive years will have a lasting effect on them. Will they grow to respect other or distrust them? Will they become life-long learners, or run from the sight of a classroom because of all the bad experiences they have had? It is up to us to “train up a child in the way he (she) should go, and when he (she) is old he (she) will not depart from it.” (“Bible Gateway passage,” Proverbs 22:6, NKJV)

References

Bible Gateway passage: Proverbs 22:6 - New King James Version. (n.d.). Retrieved April 14, 2019, from Bible Gateway website:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs+22%3A6&version=NKJV>

Dretzke, B. J., Sheldon, T. D., & Lim, A. (2015). What Do K-12 Teachers Think about Including Student Surveys in Their Performance Ratings? *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 27(3), 185–206. (Mid-Western Educational Research Association. P.O. Box 34421, Chicago, IL 60634-0421. Tel: 419-372-7401; Fax: 419-372-2828; e-mail: mer@bgsu.edu; Web site: <http://www.mwera.org>).

ineffective - Google Search. (n.d.). Retrieved April 8, 2019, from

<https://www.google.com/search?q=ineffective&oq=ineffective&aqs=chrome..69i57j69i60.3685j0j1&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

inefficient - Google Search. (n.d.). Retrieved April 8, 2019, from

<https://www.google.com/search?q=inefficient&oq=inefficient&aqs=chrome..69i57j69i60j69i59j0l3.4311j1j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

Pocketful of Primary. (n.d.). *10 Easy Classroom Management Hacks | That Teacher Life Ep 47*.

Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfyBApCF41c>

RateMyProfessors.com – Find and rate your professor or campus. (n.d.). Retrieved April 8, 2019,

from <https://www.ratemyprofessors.com/>

Rate My Teachers. (n.d.). Retrieved April 8, 2019, from <https://ratemyteachers.com/>

Real Rap With Reynolds. (n.d.). *My Daily Classroom Management Strategies | High School*

Teacher Vlog. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3fr4tm_mkE