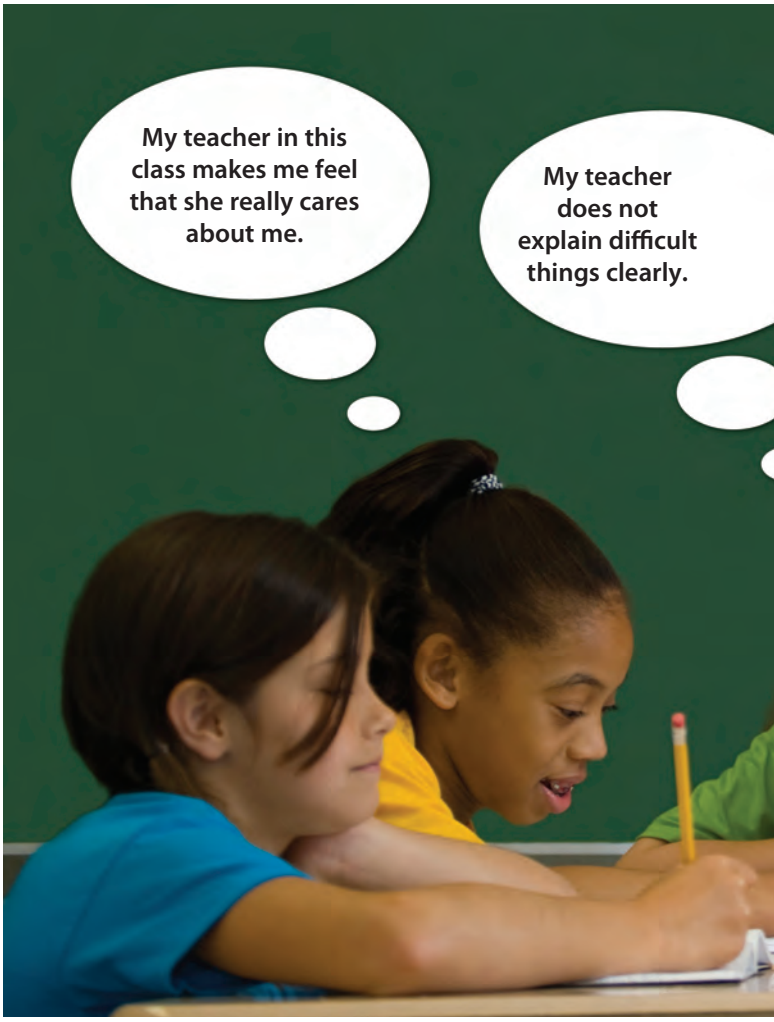
The VIEW *from the* SEATS

Student input provides a clearer picture of what works in schools



By Tracy Crow

As school districts create systems to identify, monitor, and assess teacher effectiveness, they consider a variety of sources, including observations of teaching practices and analysis of student assessments. A new voice — student perceptions — has emerged as a valuable source of information. In many districts, leaders are collecting data from a range of stakeholders that includes students, parents, and educators to gather their perceptions of school culture, classroom conditions, and teaching effectiveness.

District leaders are excited about adding this dimension of data analysis to provide a clearer picture of what's working in schools. "Having these data will enable us to truly differentiate learning so we can support every single teacher along the effectiveness spectrum," says Monica Jordan, coordinator of reflective practice in the department of teacher talent and effectiveness for Memphis (Tenn.) City Schools. While having stakeholder data was always important to the district, Jordan says that involvement in the Measures of Effective Teaching project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, had expanded the district's interest in the use of this type of information. In 2011-12, every teacher in the district has access to this data as part of the evaluation system.

Memphis City Schools is working with the Tripod Project to develop this aspect of its evaluation system. Administered by Cambridge Education, the Tripod Project is a consortium of schools and districts with a shared interest in raising achievement for all students, while narrowing gaps among students from different racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds. The project uses stakeholder surveys to generate reports to inform school improvement as well

as teacher evaluation systems through a partnership with Measures of Effective Teaching Project. Led by Ron Ferguson, senior lecturer in education and public policy and director of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University, and Rob Ramsdell, vice president of Cambridge Education, the Tripod Project has administered and refined surveys over the last 10 years and provided reporting mechanisms and support for the use of the data. As this work has evolved, Ferguson and his research team have developed a framework that describes not only student engagement but also a set of classroom learning conditions that influence it. The classroom learning conditions in the framework have evolved to become what is called the Seven C's (see table on p. 26). The project has been a central component of the Measures of Effective Teaching Project.

A key concept underlying the Seven C's framework is the instructional tripod of content knowledge, pedagogical skill, and relationships, from which the organization takes its name. This tripod emphasizes the range of factors at work in the classroom, and the Seven C's further delineate the classroom conditions, teacher actions, and implications for students.

Seeking student input isn't limited to the work of the Tripod Project. Many systems have collected climate data from students for years, and there are recent examples of large-scale data collection efforts to inform school improvement planning. New York City Schools, for example, uses stakeholder surveys to gain a fuller picture of student learning experiences. Educators, parents, and students respond to surveys with questions that address the kinds of learning dimensions that are also covered in the Seven C's framework. For example, students are asked if educators in their school treat students with respect, if they feel safe, and if teachers connect learning to life outside the classroom. Rhode Island schools administer stakeholder surveys to students along with parents and educators. Topics include

HOW STUDENTS RESPONDED

Percentage of secondary students agreeing with selected statements. Includes students in classes scoring at the 25th and 75th percentile. (From among 2,985 classrooms, each with at least five students reporting.)

7 C'S FRAMEWORK	25th percentile	75th percentile
1. CARE: My teacher in this class makes me feel that he or she really cares about me.	40	73
2. CONTROL: Our class stays busy and doesn't waste time.	36	69
3. CLARIFY: My teacher explains difficult things clearly.	50	79
4. CHALLENGE: My teacher wants me to explain my answers — why I think what I think.	59	83
5. CAPTIVATE: My teacher makes learning enjoyable.	33	72
6. CONFER: My teacher wants us to share our thoughts.	47	79
7. CONSOLIDATE: My teacher takes the time to summarize what we learn each day.	38	67

Source: *Measures of Effective Teaching Project,* 2010.

instructional methods, school safety and discipline, resource availability, and teacher expectations.

Data from the Tripod Project, however, are available at the classroom level. "The same students experience very different things in different classrooms," Ramsdell says. Those different experiences are often the result of specific teacher actions. The data that come from these surveys illuminate in detail what teachers are doing — or not doing.

WHY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Based on his analysis of years of data, Ferguson says students are generally happier, more hard-working and more satisfied with their achievements in classrooms that rate higher on the Seven C's. "We started the Tripod framework with a focus on student engagement and then added an emphasis on instruction. The Gates project has focused on our Seven C's measures of instruction," Ferguson says. "We had added a focus on the quality of instruction because we wanted to see what produced student engagement."

Ferguson posits that when teachers teach effectively, student learning improves for two reasons. First, if teachers are explaining concepts more clearly, students will better understand the content and do better on tests. Second, if teachers are teaching more effectively on all seven dimensions of the framework, students are going to be more engaged in what's happening in the classroom. "Through the engagement, they're going to do the work that leads to more learning," he says.

With a focus on engagement, "we're making the point that we care," Ferguson says. That caring goes beyond test scores. While some teaching strategies may improve test performance, they may not contribute to longer-term learning. "Most of us as parents would sacrifice a few points on a test in exchange for more happiness," he says. "We want to build a love of learning, not just maximize the score of the next test coming up."

Test scores do improve, however. Information collected as part of the Measures of Effective Teaching research shows alignment between classes scoring at high percentiles and teachers receiving high ratings on selected statements tied to the Seven C's framework from the students in those classes (see table at left.) For example, 50% of students in 25th-percentile classes agree with the statement, "My teacher explains difficult things clearly," while 79% of students in 75th-percentile classes agree (Measures of Effective Teaching Project, 2010).

Jordan explains the value she sees in the framework, both for understanding what boosts student achievement and how teachers can improve their practices. When she sees the bulk of students responding that they experience particularly high levels of the challenge and control elements, for example, she knows from other data that those students are also high-achieving. With these elements, she says, "the teacher has control over the class and presses the student to keep trying." Given the correlation between high achievement and control and challenge, Jordan says it makes sense to offer professional learning that makes explicit to teachers the moves that prompt students to perceive that classrooms are challenging and under control. "Those moves can't be invisible to the teacher. They have to be very obvious," she says

The problem is that such professional learning can't be one-size-fits-all. Since the district can't provide one-to-one coaching for every teacher, it will turn to other solutions, including bud-in-ear coaching that allows remote observers to remind teachers precisely what teacher moves create the most impact for students.

LEARNING FROM THE DATA

Using such data for professional learning at the individual level has not yet been systematic or widespread, according to Ramsdell. "We have lots of schools and districts that have used our services over the years. I'd characterize them as early adopt-

ers, usually spearheaded by a champion in the district who has a real passion for including student voice in school improvement efforts." Only recently have districts begun to include this data in professional learning planning and teacher evaluation systems.

As the Tripod Project becomes a part of teacher evaluation and accountability systems, educators' perceptions are bound to change. "It's getting a very different kind of attention," Ramsdell says. "Because of results from the Measures of Effective Teaching initiative, there's a different kind of credibility assigned to the surveys. They are being used much more systematically and seriously than in the past."

Teachers have told Ramsdell that this data coming directly from students is enticing in some ways. Teachers realize that they have immediate control over the actions that contribute to students' perceptions and experiences, whereas they may not feel that same level of control related to other measures of their effectiveness. Ferguson has seen similar reactions and says he hopes that teachers' response to the data opens the door for more professional learning. "At least some folks on our research team think that having teachers see their results is going to give them a greater incentive to tune into professional development supports, and I think that's probably right," he says. He wants to make sure that teachers get the message that these are all dimensions on which they can improve.

The Tripod Project also surveys teachers, and matching what teachers say about their practices and their students with what their students say is revealing.

"Just like we want teachers to address students with an 'I'm going to support you, I believe in you, I'm not going to let you fail' approach, we need to address teachers with that same attitude," Ferguson says. "Everybody in the building is a learner. None of us is fully realized in terms of our potential and we're going to work together to help each of us to reach our potential."

Ferguson's hope is that schools and districts can use this data as an improvement tool, and that school and district leaders find ways to make clear to educators that the purpose of such tools is not punitive. Ideally, districts would say, " 'We're not going to judge you or judge what your potential might be based on any measure that we've taken today. We will use the measure we took today in order to get a better understanding of what we need to work on,' " Ferguson says.

ALIGNING PRACTICES WITH PERCEPTIONS

Students aren't the only ones to offer their perceptions through these surveys. The Tripod Project also surveys teachers, and matching what teachers say about their practices and their students with what their students say is revealing. Some of the teachers' answers demonstrate how comfortable they are teaching the lower-performing students in their classes. For example, questions address whether teachers call on high achievers more than they call on low achievers, or whether they think it slows down a class too much to encourage low achievers to ask questions.

"They can answer those on a scale of 1-5, and they don't tend to answer in the extremes," Ferguson says. The difference among teacher responses "tells you something about their sensibilities and their attitudes about the kids," he says.

What Ferguson calls the "give-up index" is a scale that signals to Ferguson and his researchers that a teacher is giving up on the low achiever in class. "When you look at how a teacher's rating on the give-up index correlates with how the students have rated the teacher, there's a clear relationship," he says. "When you put all this together, you get an image of a social environment where the feedback effects operate in both directions. What the teacher is doing affects how the student is responding and how the student is responding is affecting what the teacher is doing." While he believes that what teachers are saying about their students' behaviors is fairly accurate, the teachers probably don't realize that their own practices are causing at least some of the student behaviors that they are observing.

To help build teachers' capacity to reach and engage students, the team at Tripod is working with Robert Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, to share a library of videos of teaching practices. Professional learning will be organized around educators viewing and discussing teaching examples. Observing one another in classrooms is another strategy for examining practice.

Another useful learning strategy is a discussion protocol Ferguson and his team use called "Teaching the hard stuff" to engage educators in exploring specific aspects of their instructional practices. Teachers work together over the course of a school year, bringing assignments on which students struggled, accompanied by both strong and weak examples of related student work. Together the group examines the student work. Their conversations are organized around two headings — feasibility and focus. As they discuss feasibility, teachers consider if success was feasible for the students who didn't do well. For example, was the vocabulary confusing, or were there concepts that the teacher didn't make clear? As they consider focus, they talk about whether students were paying attention, wondering whether the teacher made the content sufficiently interesting or tied it to the world outside the classroom.

Such discussions are always valuable learning experiences, Ferguson says. "When I sit with teachers who go through this exercise, they virtually always get up from the table with a different understanding of their students and their students' work," he says. They walk away with clear ideas about what they need to do next.

However, even when schools know the value of teachers spending time together this way, they don't always make it happen, just as they don't create enough opportunities for teachers

to observe one another in classrooms. "People have been talking about that for at least the last 10 to15 years," Ferguson says, yet such peer-to-peer observations are not as commonplace as they should be. *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success* reports that of all collaborative activities, teachers observing one another and providing feedback is the least common (MetLife, 2010, p. 18).

PRESSURE FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

In spite of the acknowledged value of such collaborative learning practices, they haven't been happening as often as they should, but Ferguson thinks that will change as the pressure to strengthen teaching mounts. He believes that the accountability environment surrounding teaching will encourage more teachers to engage in this kind of learning.

In 2005, Ferguson asked teachers to respond to a survey about the last professional development they had experienced that had little or no impact on teaching or learning (Ferguson, 2006). Among the reasons checked most often was that teachers were not held accountable for doing it. These were environments where teachers knew almost with certainty that they wouldn't be monitored, according to Ferguson. That lack of implementation is "just not going to work anymore," he says. Effective application — of the Seven C's or any new initiative — is going to require some kind of monitoring. Instructional leadership will get us there, Ferguson says.

His research into exemplary high schools (Ferguson, Hackman, Hanna, & Ballantine, 2010) highlights the importance of leadership in moving schools through successful change. "I suspect there are a lot of people in leadership positions who have never seen a truly exemplary school, and they doubt that it could happen," Ferguson says. He believes that schools that make positive improvements sometimes do it before the people involved believe it can happen. "They did it because some people at the top said, 'Look, we're doing this,' and then people were surprised when they got great results," he says. Such educators learned to get great results over time and then expectations arose as a consequence of success.

Ultimately, the success didn't come because these educators believed in their students, Ferguson says. Rather, they believed in their kids because they succeeded, and they succeeded because of the social and political conditions in the school that pushed them to do things they weren't doing before.

While some educators have been resistant to have the tough conversations that can lead to change, others are excited to embrace this new source of information. Ferguson remembers a particularly influential teacher last year who asked to see his classroom-level reports. Previously, the school shared building-level reports that showed trends and patterns without identifying specific teachers. When the teacher realized how valuable the information was, he insisted that every teacher needed to see their results whether they wanted to or not. He realized that "it made absolutely no sense for teachers not to get their results," Ferguson says. Teachers responded with enthusiasm, telling the assistant principal this was the most valuable feedback they had ever received due to its immediacy and authenticity.

One challenge is to make sure that school leaders prepare teachers to look at their results and consider their impact appropriately. Ramsdell stresses that this is just one source of data among many. Jordan agrees. In Memphis, district leaders are helping teachers understand the big picture that any feedback is valuable, and the context for these data is important. Ferguson's work is "what gives us permission to ask students for their perceptions," she says, so it is important to give teachers experiences that help them understand why these data are valid. They are taking these steps slowly. When Memphis schools started the Measures of Effective Teaching project, the district inundated teachers with the research behind it, and it was a "fire-hydrant experience," Jordan says. As all teachers are exposed to student perception data, district leaders are introducing the information about Seven C's more slowly, with the intention that as teachers spend more time on the data, the learning about what it means will become more complex to support their evolving understanding.

The Tripod Project's origins tie the use of this data to professional learning and school improvement purposes, and Ramsdell and Ferguson are eager to see that emphasis continue. "I would like to see places using these kinds of tools for two, three, four years focused mainly on professional learning and only eventually start to use it to make judgments that have consequences for people's careers," Ferguson says. "If people use and honor this information, it gives them a number of ideas on dimensions along which they can get better."

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