Take a Picture

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Want to see your schools through the eyes of your students? A program that give students cameras will give you a window into their world

When you think about middle school or high school, what comes to mind? Regardless of whether the memory is pleasant or unpleasant, it stays with you. We've learned that success in school is not just about academics; it's also about students connecting with one another and their teachers and creating social and emotional bonds to their schools and communities. Adults often downplay or even ignore this aspect of schooling. We ask children, "What did you do in school today?" We don't ask, "What makes school special for you? What makes you feel connected to your school?" And, if we did, many students would find the question foreign to them because neither their teachers nor their families have ever asked before.

Yet we know that connectedness, sometimes called school engagement, is key

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to a student's academic success. In his report, *School Connectedness: Improving Students' Lives*, Johns Hopkins University professor Robert Blum makes the point that connectedness "improves educational motivation, classroom engagement, academic performance, school attendance and completion rates" while decreasing "absenteeism, fighting, bullying and vandalism."

We also know that, when students reach the age to vote with their feet, huge numbers of them drop out, making it clear they can't wait to disconnect from the system. Or, could it be that they never felt connected in the first place?

Measuring connectedness

As researchers attempting to understand why some middle and high schools do such a good job serving students with disabilities, we have taken on the issue of student connectedness in three national, federally funded studies of inclusive schools. Conducting the research required us to measure some rather abstract elements, including the extent of student engagement with their schools. To do so, we turned to a tool developed by the U.S. National Park Service. In order to measure the comparative attractiveness of the sights within their parks, the Park Service gave disposable cameras to tourists as they entered a park, asked them to take pictures of their favorite places in the park, and collected the cameras as the tourists left. The captured images provided the service with valuable information regarding its stellar attractions.

We adapted the technique to create a tool called Kids With Cameras. The purpose of the tool is to discover what and who connects students to their schools. The first question for a school board or administrators is, "What do you want to know?" Like the park service, you are searching for information about the "landscape" of your school. You might want to know why certain types of students, like English language learners or special education students, are dropping out or why 10th-graders in one school are staying in school while in other schools they are dropping out. You might be interested in assessing the general climate in one or more of your middle or high schools. You may even seek to know why some principals are so successful in gaining and keeping the trust of students. Kids With Cameras can help you understand these issues from the student perspective.

In our research using Kids With Cameras, we asked the students to talk to us or write about why they took each picture. Since we used the tool with students with disabilities, oral interviews often yielded richer information than asking them to write.. The result is a data set that contains both a pictorial record of what students connect with in the school and a verbal account of why each of these connections is important.

Getting started

Kids With Cameras is straightforward and cost-effective to implement. All you need are teachers willing to take on the assignment, some digital or disposable cameras, and a cadre of students. There are three stages to the process: planning, implementing, and reflecting.

Stage 1: Planning—Planning involves selecting students and making sure they understand the assignment. Student selection is determined by the topic. Because of our mission, we focused on students with disabilities or those who might be at risk for dropping out, and we found that even students with severe disabilities can participate if accompanied by an adult as they take pictures.

Students need clear instructions and a time frame. We kept the instructions to a minimum, but made it clear that only one or two pictures should be of friends. Of course friends are a powerful connection to school, but 16 pictures of the same 10 kids clowning around is not a helpful result. We also primed the pump by providing the students with some questions to ask themselves before they begin.

- What adults are important to me in the school?
- What things are important to me in the school?
- What places are important to me in the school?
- What activities are important to me in the school?

The project works best if the students have no more than three days to complete the assignment, and if they are given some out-of-class time to take the pictures. We select no more than 15 students at a time to keep the project manageable.

Stage 2: Implementing—Implementing Kids With Cameras includes getting the pictures taken (we recommend approximately 20 pictures per student), collecting the cameras, having the pictures developed or put on a disc, and then scheduling an interview with each student. The discussion with students is key to understanding why they took each picture and what it means for them. Do not attach the students' names to the pictures, but label them so that pictures from a single student (Student A) can be identified. Be sure to get two sets of pictures from each camera so the students will have one to take home.

Stage 3: Reflecting—Reflecting on the meaning of information is the most important part of the process, but it is often rushed or overlooked. We encourage the group that sponsors the Kids With Cameras activity to devote at least one hour to review the students' pictures and interviews. A culminating question could be, "What are the implications for action?" You don't have to consider every picture. Some will be blurred or out of focus and some will be clearly irrelevant. Once the pictures have been gathered and a narrative attached to them, this can be the start of discussion with staff members and others. Consider these questions:

- What themes or patterns emerge from the pictures selected?

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■ What do these patterns tell us about student connections to school?

■ What are the implications of our discussion for further action?

There is no predicting what you will learn from Kids With Cameras, but based on our experience you are likely to be pleased, surprised, and perhaps even appalled.

What they found

Here are a few samples from the many examples from our research using the Kids With Cameras activity in schools. All student and school names are pseudonyms.

Connection and protection: McKinley Middle School, set in an urban New Jersey district, is distinguished by its orderly climate and high morale on the part of both teachers and students. We learned early on that Mr. C. was a charismatic and popular principal, but when he turned up in every student's photos, sometimes in three or four pictures, we got some hints on how he maintains discipline in the school and keeps students connected. "He can make a bully cry," said one student who was often bullied. "You can be in trouble with him one day," said another, "but the next day, he's not mad anymore." One student took a picture of Mr. C.'s necktie. It seems that each morning a different student gets to choose which of many colorful ties displayed in the office Mr. C. will wear that day. The students take tremendous pride in the small gesture. "He's wearing my tie today."

A sense of safety: Feeling safe in school is the foundation for creating a positive school climate. At Appalachee High School in Florida, where 95 percent of students with disabilities reported on a survey that they feel safe in school, we found 15-year-old Chloe, a child abused and abandoned by her parents. Living in a group home, Chloe was a fearful child with many emotional issues and intellectual challenges. Although she was never able to function in the mainstream and was limited verbally, one of her teachers said she was sure that Chloe could understand the Kids With Cameras assignment and she did. Accompanied by a teacher, Chloe took many pictures of the security guards at the front door of the school, because "they make us safe."

In a Colorado middle school, Kyle was an extremely bright and volatile middle school student. When we met him, both his parents were in federal prison for dealing drugs and Kyle was living with his aunt. Kyle was placed in special education both because he was prone to emotional outbursts and had problems processing information, which he is bright enough to hide most of the time. One of Kyle's pictures showed the clock on a classroom wall. He explained, "It's 20 minutes to 2, and I am in math, where I can do the work and I feel relaxed. But in five minutes, I have to go to social studies, and Mr. P. gets mad at me all the time. He thinks I am just kidding around when I don't get something, but I'm not always as quick as he thinks I am. I'm nervous about what he will do and what I will do (in response) to him." Later we observed Mr. P. and saw Kyle's words come true. Mr. P did use sarcasm and mock his attempt to respond to a question, and we discovered how a single teacher, who was also having a bad day, can undo an otherwise positive and safe school experience Unfortunately, one day Kyle blew up (as he feared he would) and was suspended.

Opportunity and belonging: In another example from Apalachee High School, we met Andrew, a student who had been told in middle school that he would never achieve his dream of being in the military because he is "not smart enough to get into that." He left middle school thinking he was a failure and acting like a cut-up. His life changed when he reached Apalachee. Before he even showed us his pictures, he said, "You have to understand that you don't go to Apalachee; you belong to it." His pictures reflect that. Many of them were snapshots of his ROTC class. Andrew no longer sees himself as just an "ordinary kid."

What connects students to school? It can be almost anything. Manuel, a special education student who came to the U.S. speaking very little English, took pictures of the butterfly garden at his middle school, a place he goes when life is just too much for him. Betty, profoundly deaf, has found an identity being president of her American Sign Language Club in her high school. Her pictures showed the group out to dinner at a local restaurant. Hannah, another special education student, one whose family lives in economically disadvantaged circumstances, took a picture of the hot air balloon on the cover of her social studies textbook. She said it was about her dream that she would one day leave her neighborhood to "fly far away and see the whole world."

The results of Kids With Cameras give you a new appreciation of the idea that knowledge is power. Knowing what connects students to school can generate ideas for building broader and stronger student connections.

We have translated several of our Kids With Cameras pictures and words into PowerPoint presentations, and shown them to groups of teachers, administrators, and parents. Some members of the audience are moved to tears; others are gratified and inspired. When teachers see pictures of themselves and hear students say, "This teacher really makes a difference in my life," it is as good as getting a Teacher of the Year award. What pictures would the students in your schools take? Won't you take the time to find out? ■

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