

YATST Student Year End Interviews

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Eighteen high school students from four YATST sites participated in one-on-one interviews this year. They openly and engagingly described the groups' accomplishments, the activities they took part in, and their abiding commitment to enabling students to be central to improving the cultural and instructional climates in their buildings. The interviews were a follow-up to a similar round conducted last year at this time. Two of the schools visited were veteran sites and participated in last year's interviews as well. In fact, several students shared their opinions both years. The other two schools had had "student voice" initiatives in the past but this year was their first full year of formal involvement in YATST.

This combination of the old and new allowed the interviews to build on the topics discussed last year, with young people in the latter situation echoing the theme of wanting to move from valuable talk to concrete action and students in the former circumstance being able to depict what that transition can and does look like. Although this report deals primarily with fresh information, it has a similar structure to last year's so that interested YATST members can more easily compare students' opinions from the two visits.

The first section therefore again addresses how and why students joined YATST. The twist added to this second look at that topic was to set it in the context of the YATST students' concerns about attracting new and diverse members. In short, they did not really know what to do, since replicating their own avenues to YATST would likely only insure an incoming group similar to themselves.

To say that the students had found their voices would be an understatement; the second section describes an evolution into empowerment that appeared to surpass simply being confident with sharing opinions and facilitating discussions. The students entirely expected to make a difference, especially because all of them had had firsthand experiences with provoking thought among their peers and instructors.

The third section once again turns to students' thoughts about how their schools had changed. It was still an abstract concept for students at the new sites, going through what the report refers to as "the survey phase," but for those in "the post-survey phase" change had become a reality – perhaps still subdued but patently evident nevertheless.

The report's fourth part is a conclusion of sorts. It takes a step back from giving center stage to the students' comments to reflecting on the implications of what they said for surfacing "theories of action" within the YATST schools. Their experiences appeared to reveal both "opportunistic" and "deliberate" paths to change. These were probably complimentary approaches and, based on this small sample of four schools, perhaps equally likely to present themselves. Regardless, the brief discussion of them might serve as a useful springboard for enunciating more fully how these spirited and thoughtful young people might achieve their deeply felt aspirations.

As a final note, every single young person offered cogent and penetrating insights into YATST and its prospects. Accordingly, the report contains at least one direct quote from each of them.

Becoming Involved – and Encouraging Others to Do So Too

The students seemed to have come to YATST in one of two ways: Either an adult in the school told the student he or she should become a member (e.g., “I was requested to join by [an adult YATST participant] because I am known for being a leader” and “I was pulled in; there was a list of names nominated by teachers”) or the student knew someone who was already in the group and therefore wanted to know more about what YATST did (e.g., “One of my good friends was involved and I saw her inspired and I wanted to be a part of that” and “I was invited by a friend and I looked into it and saw that it was a great idea to be able to work with adults to make the school a better place”). There was one student who made an unsolicited inquiry about joining YATST in response to an activity the group had conducted in the building but this appeared to be the only instance of someone taking the initiative to take part without having some other existing connection (“YATST had a chalk talk and I thought that would be fun to do and so I asked how to join”).

Beyond wanting to be with friends, YATST participants mentioned looking for leadership opportunities and promoting more student engagement in the classroom as reasons for their involvement. Most of the young people indicated that they did not struggle in school. In fact, to the contrary, there seemed to be a sizeable proportion of honors students, sports captains, and multi-school activity participants among the eighteen interviewed. However, at least one said that joining the group was a way of trying to take a positive approach to changing what went on in classrooms instead of lashing out negatively as had been the case for the person in the past: “School and I are not great friends. I am not a good fit with the system. So I approached education in anger. But through YATST and other people, I now approach education as building relationships. It’s a more mature activism.”

Still, students worried about their lack of diversity and about how to replace seniors. They said they did engage in some “marketing,” such as class visits, the survey result presentations, and cajoling friends, but they did not feel that they were being very successful in attracting others. They posited time as one of the primary obstacles. They had little of it during the school day and they had a lot to do, which meant having to use afternoons, evenings, and/or YATST conferences to advance their goals. This, they said, turned some potential participants off and precluded others who were already busy from becoming involved. Friendship and academic groups were another hindrance. If “birds of a feather flock together,” then how could YATST members effectively reach beyond their own circle of peers to make others feel invited

enough to show up? Or, as one person framed the dilemma, “How do we pull in more than middle class white girls?”

At the same time, a few pointed out, when someone new did show up, bringing the person up to speed took valuable minutes away from forging ahead, as this participant described: “It’s frustrating to have an evolving group of people show up and not have enough time. The students wanted to feel like they were moving in a direction.” This served as a bit of a disincentive for mid-year recruiting. Overall, though, no one expressed any concrete ideas about what they could differently to bring others inside the fold.

And yet all four groups were unanimously confident that YATST would survive and thrive the next year. Sustainability was not a concern. The students readily identified a core group of six to ten youth and one or two adults who would maintain the continuity of the effort, and all of the non-seniors interviewed said that they would return to YATST in the fall. Even when one or two of the primary group motivators were seniors, people believed that others were ready to step into group leadership roles, albeit not necessarily using the same style as those that had gone before.

It would be hard to gauge the extent to which this certainty about the group’s future was misplaced. Maybe the YATST groups had already naturally achieved the optimum size for an endeavor like this. That is, having six to ten people consistently present was possibly sufficient to carry out the necessary work and build a sense of community or “family,” which was a frequently used synonym for the collection of YATST young people and adults at each site. And, as several pointed out, increases in size could have made things become unwieldy. The interviews therefore contained a curious juxtaposition of assessments about the groups’ “health,” with the “mono-culture” worry being more than balanced by constructive predictions for the coming year.

Beyond Personal Benefit to Collective Empowerment

Self-confidence was a quality that was definitely not lacking among the 18 students. To a person, they claimed that they had developed and/or advanced their interaction and communication skills through YATST participation. Put more strongly to capture the underlying sense of efficacy that infused their words, they felt empowered. They had led teachers in interactions about the essence of the adults’ professional lives. They had done skits for teachers and peers about the brain. They had stood before their peers and bravely sought to present data to them about school climate. They had rotated facilitation responsibilities among themselves from meeting to meeting. They had shared ideas and plans with students and adults from other schools and in a few instances outside the state. And, as discussed later in this report, they had instigated changes within their schools. To an outsider conducting interviews, they were singularly compelling in the seriousness and sincerity they brought to the YATST table.

When asked what personal benefits had accrued from being in the group, one student beamed: “I’m doing an interview and I never did that before. I have done presentations and I have never done that before.” Such claims of having ventured into uncharted waters were as numerous this year as last. Importantly, the students pointed out that the YATST adults contributed greatly to the young people’s evolution in this regard. “The teachers did a good job,” offered a student, “They wanted us to facilitate the meetings. We’re used to teachers doing that but they went out of their way to put us in charge.” Or, as another said, “We’re all equal in there.”

Basically, the YATST students had acquired tools for facilitating effective interaction, in small and large group settings. “Effective” in this context meant being able to structure conversations that elicited a variety of opinions about a specific topic in a non-threatening manner. They did this with “chalk talks and fishbowls,” for example, and with “Prezis,” which as the students described them contained a plethora of visual representations of information, along with some audience activity. Three of the sites delved into video interviews which afforded them the opportunity to learn about follow-up questioning and probes. Some felt more comfortable than others with these strategies but everyone who participated said they gained insights into how to do improve communication.

Differences in how these groups felt about the value of the video-taping task illustrated the apparent transition groups might make from simply deriving great personal benefit from YATST to being empowered to channel intentionally every bit of their efforts toward their group’s goals. The two “survey phase” groups did not feel that the activity furthered their efforts. A student explained why: “This was correlated to YATST; they wanted us to do it but I wanted it to connect to the data we had collected but the interview questions didn’t go hand-in-hand with ours. I wouldn’t do it again. I wanted to get to harder issues about our school in the video.” A student elaborated this feeling by noting that the interview questions were not especially pertinent to the buildings’ particular survey results: “The video is good but it got off track. It relates to the survey but there was a disconnect. Some of the questions were more general and more for YATST overall but were not specific to our survey.” Another participant stated that they were told to select “clips” to share with YATST leaders but were not encouraged to create an edited product that would be, again, “specific” to their situation. They did so anyway but were left with the feeling that the exercise was not in sync with what they had done this year. “What we were asked to do was just not very specific [that word once more] to what we were doing,” explained someone who had taken part in the task.

However, a third group from a “veteran” site appeared to have felt comfortable in tailoring the task more to their needs: “YATST set up the questions. We either didn’t use some or added some that were important to what we were trying to accomplish in our school.” Reiterating this point was a different student: “We were given suggestions for questions but we would go off some of them. I based some of my questions off what the person was saying and then we also had some questions that we asked everyone.” So, perhaps the newer sites did not

receive the message that altering the task was possible or maybe the older site just assumed that it was. This contrast in how the schools approached the activity possibly distinguished what it meant to be involved versus empowered. Still, how to conduct interviews – and ask for further clarifications – was added to the skill set of all three groups: “I learned to ask follow-up questions. I’ve never even done an interview but I felt very comfortable doing this.”

School Benefits: Awareness, Attitudes, and Change

Students aspired to having effective discussions that would also lead to changes. Last year those aspirations went unfulfilled beyond increasing awareness of the group’s presence within the school and introducing student engagement in learning as a topic worthy of attention. Such was the case also this year in the two schools that were in the survey phase of the program. The survey phase is a part of YATST wherein the group administers and analyzes a climate questionnaire given to both students and teachers and then devises ways to share the results with the two audiences. Analysis, according to this year’s students, focused on strengths and weaknesses of the school as revealed in the responses, or as one student put it, “we were to see what excited us, concerned us, and confused us.”

All tended to identify what they called a “gap” or discrepancy in the data. For example, in one school, the group noticed a difference in how individuals portrayed themselves as students versus how they depicted those around them. “This jumped out at all of us,” explained one student, “With the “I” questions the response was higher; but when a question was phrased as “other students,” the response was lower.” Or, as another student summarized the data: “People by themselves are in a good place, but as a whole they didn’t think the school was.” More specifically, a very large percentage of students felt they had high expectations for themselves in the classroom but a much lower percentage said their classmates did for themselves. However, as the YATST participants pointed out, if almost everyone said that they individually have high expectations, then why did the students not see that reflected in their peers? YATST members hypothesized that they and those around them may have allowed the actions of a few students to become generalized to most students. Others said it may be because “People don’t know each other.” Whatever the explanation, students said that the student body needed to start looking at each other more positively.

Another type of gap showed up in the survey responses in questions about respect and learning – or the lack thereof. The data seemed to say that students did not feel respected by their teachers and yet the teachers claimed the opposite. Similarly, students felt that teachers tended to rely on a few ways of instructing them whereas the teachers said that they used a variety of strategies to engage students. In all instances, this information became the focus of the chalk talks with teachers and presentations with students, the purpose of which was to get people

thinking about why these perceptions were held and what might be ways of remedying the situations.

YATST participants were pleased with how serious most audience members were, although they noted exceptions among their teachers and peers. With respect to teachers, one said: “Teachers had mixed responses. Some were all for it and were like ‘I want to know why students think this way’. They were excited about how to edit the curriculum so that more would become engaged. Other teachers were less than enthused. They were like, ‘My job is to teach and I will teach the same way I have always taught. The students will have to adapt to my style’.” Another student heard a specific teacher comment along similar lines: “I wouldn’t tell a pilot how to fly a plane.”

Still, they believed that student engagement and mutual respect had moved closer to the forefront of people’s consciousness. As was the case last year, the talk had led to more talk, which was a significant outcome in and of itself, the students believed. And some students noted idiosyncratic differences in instruction. They said they detected a few instances of teachers’ going out of their way to reach more students via strategies they had not previously used in class, such as providing more examples of a concept or allowing students to interact more.

Also like last year, the path to change was somewhat vague in the newer sites. In response to a question about how change might happen, a YATST participant said with a shrug, “I honestly couldn’t tell you right now.” But the uncertainty did not dim their hopefulness, as this person stated: “Next year will be taking action with the data. It’s not set in stone what we will do and I’m not sure how we’ll do it but I want to see everyone become one community – all 300 of us.” Likewise for this person: “I got really excited about the question ‘How do we make change and shift a culture to create a more dynamic learning environment?’” All appeared to be absolutely certain that they could and would figure out the “How.”

In the two sites that were in the post-survey year, students’ experiences demonstrated two distinct paths to instigating change. In the first instance, concerns arose about the first semester exam schedule. It was unclear who or what age group initially expressed a desire to alter things and the exact troublesome details were difficult to tease out of the interviews, but regardless, the principal (a former YATST leader) suggested that the YATST group facilitate a discussion of the staff’s and students’ opinions about the matter. They chose the “fishbowl” strategy to structure the conversation. What emerged through the activity was that hardly anyone of any age was satisfied with the schedule. The faculty met subsequent to the fishbowl event and two days later testing arrangements were revamped in time for the end-of-semester tests. The students all admitted that the changes did not solve the problems adequately, but philosophized about this by saying that changes often needed “tweaking.” The faculty and administrators expected to revert to the original schedule for the end of the year and then people would tackle the issue head on again in the fall. Nevertheless, the students expressed a feeling of satisfaction from having played a central role in getting the matter addressed. The episode had more symbolic than

substantive value for participants – “It was better in theory but not in practice” a student explained, but when it came to altering an organization’s culture, symbols were not to be trivialized, as the student went on to add that next year’s YATST group would be even more of a force for change in the school because “They’ve seen intent turn into action.”

In the other “veteran” YATST site, the group developed three “action plans” that stemmed from the logical implications of their survey analyses. In their responses on the instrument, students indicated a desire to have some form of peer assistance available in the classroom, which led the YATST participants to devise a way to redefine the existing role of student assistant from being errand-focused to being classroom-based. The expectation was that this new role would be in place by the coming school year, and YATST students viewed it as a vital change: “It’s easier to do busy work [as a student assistant] but it will not be as engaging.” The group also learned that few students knew about alternative learning opportunities that would provide them with subject credits for activities outside the school day. For example, a student wanting to maximize foreign language courses could get yoga instruction approved as a way to meet physical education requirements. A student who had used this avenue praised the opportunity: “I love it and it would have never happened without this being available.” The group viewed the issue as one of awareness and planned to conduct some information-sharing or “marketing” events during the school day. Finally, YATST participants had piloted an evaluation feedback form for both students and teachers the previous year. The intent was to promote two-way and non-evaluative ideas about what actions fostered and hindered learning in the classroom, especially “to make it easier for teachers to understand what needs to be in classes for students to learn better.” The forms received spotty embracement and so YATST’s third action plan targeted their revision and widespread use in the future.

Making Change Happen, for Real

Both developments posited potential and complimentary theories of action as to how YATST participants could promote improvement. The exam example highlighted an “opportunistic” path that underscored the value of having a cadre of students available who were well-equipped to foster constructive and productive interactions and who were eager to do so when a need arose. This one anecdote hinted at the possibility that a supportive administration was beneficial to the process, as well as YATST’s having already established a healthy reputation within the building. Students’ comments underlined the centrality of having such support. Proffered a student who was describing what the group had accomplished this year and the principal’s role in facilitating their effectiveness: “.... an acceptance of the group by the faculty. That was done by the principal; that connection is there as a useful tool.” Added another: “Something that was really cool was at the awards presentation, one of the teachers praised the principal for calling on the faculty to recognize student voice and how that had

helped them in the classroom with being more dynamic.” And a third student concluded: “We really do have the administration and faculty supporting us.”

A “deliberate” path was evident in the second veteran site. This approach was more sequential and intentional – and for the moment seemed as if it was more under YATST participants’ control as to how it was instigated and enacted. However, this supposition may need refinement as the group’s three action plans are fully launched next year and as they run into questions of who has the final formal decision-making authority in some instances. Their experiences already had given participants keen insights into the complexities of altering the way schools work: “I’ve gotten a new perspective on what teachers and policy makers go through. It’s hard to change but it can be done and I’ve gotten to see what change is like.” And they realized that sometimes changes could occur without other students knowing that YATST had been a key player: “Yes, we saw school-wide benefits but it goes unrecognized by students. It goes back to the teacher in-service we did. Teachers put that into their teaching but students wouldn’t have any idea why.” They also could see the big picture of how prior actions would lead to future ones: “We are on an incline. We’ve made significant steps. We’re at a tipping place where we should be able to implement changes throughout the school.”

Based on what has happened in the four schools visited, both paths to change seem equally likely to present themselves and therefore equally worthy of further explication. For instance, in the two survey phase schools, one YATST group seemed to operate in a relatively calm, stable environment in need of a motivating impetus to promote student voice. While the students there were unsure of next steps, being able to use the survey results as a deliberate springboard was entirely possible and probable. The other YATST group was in a highly-charged situation where matters of ethnic bias in the classroom were boiling on the front burner. For them to have proceeded in lockstep fashion with tunnel vision on advancing their survey findings would have been to move YATST to the periphery of significance amid the heated debates. To be sure, the group was still in the steep part of the learning curve concerning how to promote effective interaction and thus not in a position to fully guide public discussions this year but the group did turn its attention to matters of diversity and how to achieve a more broad-based composition among its own members. However, one of the YATST students in this school highlighted a danger in the group’s becoming an “as things come up” resource to draw on in crisis situations: “Our agenda completely changed during the year. We need to refocus on ‘What do we really want to accomplish?’ The original theme of student engagement in learning is still important to work on.”

But the predominant point to be made here is that YATST schools will inevitably face both normal and atypical situations and so the program would be well-advised to examine multiple theories of action grounded in experience rather than zeroing in on a single approach for use in all schools and situations. Events in this small sample of sites clearly demonstrated that “One size did not fit all.” Indeed, the students were adamant that their actions and activity had to be “specific” to their schools. Maybe their ideas about change should eventually be as well.