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# Letter to the Reader

**H**ave you ever wondered how you could personalize and individualize instruction for every student in your classroom? In spite of budget cuts and scarcity of resources, do you want your students to experience collaborative and creative roles in advocacy, instruction, conflict resolution, and decision making? Do you want your students to value each other's intellectual, cultural, and linguistic differences and experience an increased sense of well-being and belonging? Do you want your students to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally? Do you wonder how to encourage your students to express their opinions, their voices, and become more responsible for their own learning?

Teachers and administrators face many competing priorities, such as meeting state and national mandates for higher school achievement, individualizing instruction to meet the steady increase in the diversity of the student population, and implementing new systems for early identification and the prevention of school failure (i.e., Response to Intervention or RTI). These priorities do not diminish even in times of scarcity, when budget constraints bring about reductions in force. We have heard many teachers ask for extra help in the classroom to differentiate instruction so that goals like these can be achieved by their diverse student populations. We suggest that they turn to an untapped resource—the students themselves! We wrote this book so that you could tap into the most valuable resource we have in our schools—the students themselves.

As a 21st-century educator, you are well aware that a critical challenge in today's schools involves society's responses to diversity, from segregating or shunning (marginalizing) to consciously valuing and including those who are different. When teachers help their students learn to value their own and others' differences, everyone becomes enriched. Edvard Befring (2000), a Norwegian educator who has pioneered inclusive strategies in Scandinavia, believes that when a classroom community adopts an enrichment perspective, all students gain an opportunity to be respected for their cultural and learning differences. He wrote,

The Enrichment Perspective holds promise for status to be given to differences and for diversity to be celebrated rather than lamented; it holds promise for the elimination of isolation and disenfranchisement of children with disabilities and other differentiating characteristics such as learners of English as a second language. (Befring, Thousand, & Nevin, 2000, p. 574).

Throughout the book, we share what we have learned from working with students and their teachers who have actualized an enrichment perspective as they coached and mentored their students to become co-teachers, decision makers, and advocates as part of their educational programs. We want you to be assured that there is a knowledge base (solidly grounded in evidence-based research) for students in these nontraditional roles. Achievement measures increase when students learn by peer tutoring, reciprocal teaching, partner learning, and serving as peer mediators of conflict and by participating in cooperative learning groups, community-based education, service learning, and other instructional strategies. In addition, students learn important social and emotional skills as they interact with others, especially those who are different from themselves.

We acknowledge the cutting-edge nature of many of the techniques and strategies described in this book. We honor those teachers and administrators who are leading the field into new ways of thinking about teaching and learning and collaborating with students. We anchor our strategies with vignettes that directly capture the real-life experiences of teachers and students. Reproducible resources, such as lesson plans, agenda formats, and procedures, are included to keep track of student progress. To improve the usefulness of the book, we provide attractive graphic organizers and helpful checklists as well as a glossary of key terms.

Before you begin your examination of the strategies described in this book, we invite you to reflect on your own personal experiences as a student. To what extent did you participate in experiences that allowed you to take on collaborative and creative roles? Please take a moment to respond to the 15 questions in the Student Collaboration Quiz shown in Table I.1. We believe that, when you take the quiz, you will increase your awareness of your own experiences as a student, and you will be prepared to pick out salient points of the theoretical and practical features you will discover in this book.

As you reflect upon your answers to the quiz, think about how your experiences as a student may have influenced your teaching practices and the collaborative opportunities you make available to your students today. Finally, think about how the collaborative experiences suggested in the quiz and detailed in this book might facilitate student growth in both academic and social domains (i.e., mastery, independence, belonging, and generosity).

## **DEFINITION OF COLLABORATION WITH STUDENTS**

As you read this book, you will discover that the definition of *collaboration with students* is complex, broad, and deep. Collaboration with students means directly involving students in the design, delivery, and evaluation of instruction. It means students working in cooperative learning groups, as tutors and partners in partner learning, and as co-teachers with their teachers. Collaboration with students means involving students as decision makers and problem solvers, as designers of their own learning, and in being self-determined in planning for

**Table 1.1** Student Collaboration Quiz (for Teachers)

Directions: Please circle the rating that best fits your own experience as a student.

1. How often were you expected to support the academic and social learning of other students, as well as be accountable for your own learning, by working in cooperative groups?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
2. Were you, as a student, given the opportunity and training to serve as an instructor for a peer?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
3. Were you, as a student, given the opportunity to receive instruction from a trained peer?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
4. How often were you involved in a discussion of the teaching act with an instructor?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
5. Were you, as a student, given the opportunity to co-teach a class with an adult?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
6. How often were you taught creative problem-solving strategies and given an opportunity to employ them to solve academic or behavioral challenges?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
7. How often were you asked to evaluate your own learning?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
8. How often were you given the opportunity to assist in determining the educational outcomes for you and your classmates?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
9. How often were you given the opportunity to advocate for the educational interests of a classmate or asked to assist in determining modifications and accommodations to curriculum?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
10. How often were you asked to provide your teachers with feedback as to the effectiveness and appropriateness of their instruction and classroom management?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
11. Were you, as a student, given the opportunity and training to serve as a mediator of conflict between peers?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
12. How often were you, as a student, encouraged to bring a support person to a difficult meeting to provide you with moral support?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
13. How often were you provided the opportunity to lead or facilitate meetings that addressed your academic progress and/or future (e.g., developing personal learning plans, student-parent-teacher conferences, an IEP meeting)?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
14. How often did you participate as an equal with teachers, administrators, and community members on school committees (e.g., curriculum committee, discipline committee, hiring committee, school board)?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
15. How often did you, as a student, feel that the school "belonged" to you, that school experiences were structured primarily with student interests in mind?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often

their own futures. Collaboration with students means engaging students as mediators of conflict and controversy and as advocates for themselves and others. Collaboration with students means fostering self-discipline and student learning and use of responsible behavior. We encourage you to add your own distinctions about what it means for you to collaborate with students.

## **ORGANIZATION OF THE CONTENTS OF THE BOOK**

This book is organized into three parts. Part I (Introduction) includes three items. Following the Foreword, which addresses the question “Why should educators bother to unleash the potential of their students as resources in their classrooms?” and this Letter to the Reader, the first chapter explores multiple rationales for adults to collaborate with students in teaching, decision making, and advocacy.

In Part II (Teaching With Students), three chapters describe students as teachers (a) in collaborative learning groups (Chapter 2), (b) in peer tutor and partner learning relationships with other students (Chapter 3), and (c) in co-teaching partnerships with adults (Chapter 4).

Part III (Decision Making With Students) explores the multiple ways that students can make decisions that affect their own and one another’s education and learning environments. The five chapters include practical how-to tools and strategies for developing students’ collaborative and creative thinking skills (Chapter 5), engaging students in decision making to individualize their learning (Chapter 6), encouraging students to create and achieve their personal learning plans (Chapter 7), structuring and using peer mediation techniques and strategies for conflict and controversy management (Chapter 8), and helping students develop responsibility to regulate and monitor their own self-discipline and self-control (Chapter 9).

In the Epilogue, we conclude the book with an invitation to explore how students can go beyond tolerance of those who are different from themselves towards befriending each other. There is still much to learn about how to teach students to develop skills that lead to self-advocacy, advocacy of other students in their schools and communities, and friendship development. The overall goal is to show that teachers and students value diversity and can co-create a caring community where students can experience democracy in action.

While you read the book, please imagine you are a student enrolled in a school where teachers and administrators use the student empowerment strategies, collaborative planning and teaching skills, and creative solution-finding techniques we describe. Then, once you’ve finished the book, take the quiz again. Expect to experience dramatic, positive changes in your score. We hope you will commit to making it possible for future generations of school-children to be able to check more ratings of “often” and “very often” when they take the Student Collaboration Quiz (see Resource G).