

A Different Perspective:

Listening to Urban Kids: School Reform and the Teachers they want. Bruce L. Wilson and H. Dickinson Corbett. State University of New York Press. New York: 2001

Adults are often close minded when it comes to the way things are done or have been done for an extended period of time. Wilson and Corbett use a resource rarely tapped in to and one that adults often overlook to promote change and large scale reform in urban schools. They bring the students who are affected by the adult's decisions in to the picture.

Listening to Urban Kids does not attempt to solve a single reform issue rather it offers ideas to deal with the most glaring problems found in urban public schools. The authors focus on tearing down the stereotypes and barriers surrounding urban schools as well as emphasizing the importance of quality teacher-student relationships, create and accomplish manageable standards, and creating extended help to not only for those who reach out for it but those who do not avail themselves of it. What makes their approach so unique is not the topics they address but whom they look to for insight. Children interviewed and observed from six urban public schools offer the authors the data and ideas that are integral to this book.

Wilson and Corbett are unique in the sense that they make their case and ideas for reform through the input of students. This is quite revolutionary when it comes to reform thought in urban schools and that is precisely what makes this book a worthy read. Subjecting the reader to ideas of the students who are involved in the everyday

functioning of the school offers a straightforward, no holds barred look at the problems and what seems to work best in dealing with them. While most reform is debated at the highest levels of the educational system, this book looks for information and ideas from this often neglected group. Though students rarely understand the big picture and the constraints school administrators are saddled with, they are able to point out some of the most obvious solutions to problems adults debate endlessly over. This differing perspective opens up many doors and should be included and reviewed when reform is being sought.

Listening to Urban Kids is co-authored by Bruce L. Wilson and H. Dickinson Corbett. Both men are independent educational researchers and have compiled more of their thoughts and research in another co-authored and reform based book: *Testing, Reform, and Rebellion*. Wilson and Corbett also have individually helped to co-write a variety of educational reform minded books with many different educational researchers and developers.

Wilson and Corbett have a clear goal in mind, and this book supports both their purpose and thesis with a variety of studies, observations, and self concluded statements. The purpose of their work is to better inform educationally skeptical and educationally curious members of society of the importance in listening to the ideas and needs of the people who are at the bottom of reforms major plans: the students. Throughout the majority of the book the authors consistently emphasize the ideas of the students and allow for their studies to back up these students claims. Chapter four is specifically titled “What Teachers Students Want,” and uses many interviews, inserting in to the book the exact dialogue between the investigator and the student. These chronicled sessions offer much of the ideas Wilson and Corbett were hoping to receive while building a purpose

for their writings. Pages sixty-three through eighty-four offer many of these sessions and are integral to the authors' argument.

The thesis of this book stated in a very general way may resemble a testament to the positive affects that hearing what urban kids think about the current educational system and the importance of including their ideas in reform politics. The thesis is very similar to that of the book's purpose. Both promote the use of a resource often forgotten when dealing with problems in urban schools, and both allow for the reader to focus on the impact of kids in an educational system.

Wilson and Corbett use a unique approach to develop their books' main purpose. Through a variety of interviews and question and answer sessions they accumulated data sufficient to satisfy the amount of credibility that is necessary for a valid study. The book traces three years of the lives of these students and are inundated with the real question and answer sessions that led to the writing of this book. With poor grammar and incomplete logic on behalf of many of the students interviewed, the authors take advantage of the student's innocence and uncorrupted ideas to form a believable argument. One must only read through the interview sessions to understand the context in which the students are portrayed. Pages thirty-five through ninety-one in Listening to Urban Kids are prime examples of the authors' methods. They are chock full of interviews that are very real and very emotional. While the book is put together differently than most education reform type books, it is effective in getting the authors' main points across.

Listening to Urban Kids begins with a basic introduction describing the authors' purpose and their belief in the necessity of hearing from the kids at which most reforms are directed. They neglect to name a specific area in which they hope to reform, but are

very specific in stating that listening to kids better enhances the chance of positive reform in all areas of an urban public school. The subjects of their interviews and the schools targeted are introduced in the beginning of the book. Wilson and Corbett aim their study (Taking place from 1995-1998.) towards middle school children in a notoriously impoverished school district consisting of five schools in urban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It is also noted at this point that in the last year of testing a sixth, high achieving school was examined to help better compare their research.

In the next portion of the book the reader finds observations about the changes of not only the schools being reviewed but the students as well. The study is focused on a three year window because it allowed the writers' to make observations on a complete cycle of the middle school curriculum; starting in sixth grade and ending as eight graders. This portion is stuffed with interviews of students as they move through the school system and collects many of their opinions and problems. The observations range from students comments on what their teachers should do to better reach them as well as ways students feel they should be disciplined in order to be productive members of the classroom. Also addressed is the importance of a changing environment in schools and classrooms while offering thoughtful ideas to combat disruptive classroom situations or classrooms that simply lack the support needed to help their students achieve.

The book also looks at how the five schools differ by examining their science pedagogy and English content. Through more observation and interviews the authors offer stories of unequal and insufficient programs at almost all the schools. Some schools were better in science and lacked in the English department while others were just the opposite, but the majority of the schools surveyed struggled to be efficient in either

curriculum. This section also looked at teachers who taught similar styles in different schools and how the classes performed with a similar curriculum.

The fourth part of the book is the authors' largest collection of input by students. It focuses almost solely on what the students want or expect from their teachers. It offers insight in to what type of teacher they praised and the qualities that they found most endearing. Throughout this section students explained the traits they respected most, including teachers who pushed them to complete work, maintained order in a classroom setting, put effort in to reaching the whole class, and those who consistently varied activities.

After two years of observation at the five original schools the authors' found results that agreed with their purpose or thesis, yet were concerned that they had nothing to compare them to. The third year brought a new school in to the mix. This school was different from the previous schools mainly because it had received money to implant new programs that remained out of reach for the original schools. This section does much of the same in showing observations of both the English and science programs, as well as offering the students perspectives on similar questions that were asked in the five original schools. This school had put in to action many of the ideas in which students from the poverty-stricken schools had suggested and were seeing desirable affects.

Lastly Wilson and Corbett integrated their own ideas with the suggestions and observations students had provided them. They used this method to get across the importance of reform with the influence of children's perspectives. They cover a large range of the most hotly debated reform topics such as standardized testing and racial equity as well as ideas they believe must be implemented in to urban public schools in

order for them to succeed throughout the rest of their education as well as their future plans.

Listening to Urban Kids is an emotionally charged attempt to educate school administrators, staff and the interested public about the importance of listening to children in urban areas when it comes to turning around the plight of their schools. The author's affectively integrate personal observations with interviews and statistics for over three years of middle school students to pursue their purpose. They do indeed make a strong case towards proving their thesis with the addition of the sixth school and the results in which they find after comparing the two sets of information. The sixth school had put in play initiatives that were very similar to the request and suggestions of the impoverished students of the initial schools, was truly succeeding and education was steadily improving in its quality. A report produced by the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory agreed strongly with the ideas of Wilson and Corbett. Though the study was not conducted in an urban setting it posed many of the same questions found in this book. The results of the Northwest study advocated the importance of student feedback not only in urban public schools but those that are "ok financially". This is a very promising study for Wilson and Corbett's cause, proving that even schools with enough money can be better tailored to the students needs by simply listening to the kid's ideas.

The idea of student involvement in reform issues is foreign to most students in our public school systems. This is one of the biggest detractors for urban public schools: They rarely have a voice in which to represent their concerns. There are many factors that contribute to this lack of representation but in recent years students have started to make strides towards getting their voice heard. Anne C. Lewis an educational reform lobbyist believes programs are being implemented in many of the most impoverished inner cities

with the hopes of finding capable leaders and voices to help better represent urban schools, yet expresses the concern that these type of students often lack a belief in the system and do not perform at levels they are able too. This brings up a compelling question. Who will motivate students with all the abilities but no belief in the power of their ideas? Regardless Wilson and Corbett seem to accomplish their purpose by sparking the idea of the good that can come from student involvement and student response. They clearly spell out the purpose of their writing as the reader moves through the book, and show evidence of it being effective through intensive interviews covering three years.

The book does an exceptional job of using these all telling interviews to evoke strong emotion in favor of student involvement in urban education. By using the actual language of the students the authors' claim becomes that much more compelling. In one portion of the book an interviewer asked a student about the constant change of teachers in his class, his response, "We don't do work or nuthin', and they all be acting up." (Corbett, Wilson 37) Just the way this student's response is portrayed makes the cause seem real and gives the book credibility beyond that of most reform orientated books.

If the idea's Wilson and Corbett painted throughout the book were to be better adhered to they would definitely have positive effects on not only the learning and life in urban public schools, but would help build more quality communities. In the school building, student's ideas would obviously be listened to with more intent while also promoting the growth of strong, educated leaders within classes. These students would become catalysts for growth within the walls of the school and set examples for fellow students who do not believe they can make a difference. Listening to these kids would also lead towards a stronger society. The kids who had been shuffled through school and

sent directly in to the real world with little belief they could make a difference in their society (Noguera 59-81) could possibly become the voice for change in the future. The society would also become stronger with these confident new leaders

The authors, Wilson and Corbett, wrote this book with the intentions of creating confident students leaders who had an opinion on what really needed to be done in urban education reform. While it is not directly written towards the school aged reader, it definitely advocates the writers' belief in a system that allows for more student involvement and influence. The authors' went about proving the validity of their purpose or thesis by not only using their experience and knowledge on public school reform but the young minds of the students who are directly touched by the reform initiatives their superiors are putting into place. Through interviews and observations of six different schools Wilson and Corbett were able to compile data that was relevant to the thesis they were attempting to prove. Their compilations did a very good job of making the point that students do indeed have ideas on how to better their learning environment and that in the future it is imperative we as the school directors, community members, and responsible citizens open our ears to advice from a source we have largely dismissed as inappropriate or undereducated. The authors' definitely are able to convince the reader that students do indeed have ideas that are relevant to the well being of the schools, schools that should be more concerned about the well being of their students then their scores on standards and other regulated testing situations. One student interviewed summed up what being allowed creativity and a chance to succeed meant to him/ her by stating, "Science is finally exciting and fun. Everyday is a new thing!" (Corbett, Wilson 99) Listening to Urban Kids is well written investigations in to a resource reformist's in urban public schools rarely take advantage of. By focusing on the children's perspective

not only do we see a fresh side of the reform debate but also an innocent non-incentive driven response to things that work in these schools and things that are merely leading students through the motions. Wilson and Corbett write a piece of literature that attacks the pre conceived bias many have regarding urban students. This is definitely an important piece of literature, as it is one of few books regarding reform that deals with what the kids really believe and hope for the future of their educations and the educations of their younger brothers and sisters.

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