# Empowering Student Voices:

## Transforming Moroccan Public Schools through Inclusive Communication and Engagement

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**Abstract:**

The Moroccan public school system faces significant challenges, often exacerbated by an inhospitable environment and strained relationships lacking empathy, righteousness, and trust among the key stakeholders. This article explores the potential of empowering students through meaningful involvement to address various behavioral dysfunctions stemming from a host of factors. The aim is to improve this discouraging school climate. The magical keystone for any educational change is the student. Now is the time for students to be granted the position they legitimately deserve in the educational scene. The study strongly argues that giving students a voice and treating them as responsible partners in school-related issues can lead to positive changes in the school environment.

The far-reaching prospects of encouraging students to express themselves on all matters that concern them could bring about significant shifts. Empowering learners through meaningful involvement could resolve the problems at school, including issues related to engagement and behavioral conduct. The initial step to reclaiming this misplaced senselessness is to help students have a say at school. After all, aren't they claimed to be the center of the entire educational enterprise?

Drawing on a multidisciplinary framework, the study examines the dynamics of power within the school context and its alignment with students' voices, aiming to establish trustworthy, efficient ongoing communication among stakeholders. By reconceptualizing and recognizing student roles as dynamic agents, schools can foster a sense of respect and belonging, thereby creating a responsible, participatory community. This trajectory promises significant benefits for student well-being and overall educational success for all involved.

**Key Terms:**

School climate, Student empowerment, Power dynamics, Student voice, Stakeholder communication, Participatory community, Student well-being.

**Introduction:**

John Dewey never ceased to assert that education is a journey marked by exploration and growth (Dewey, 1916). Beyond academic records, the educational experience plays a pivotal role in the personal development of both learners and educators, fostering life skills such as autonomous management, collaboration, and effective communication.

Gone are the days when transmitting or exchanging knowledge was seen as the first and foremost aim of schools. Now, the philosophy of education pledges immense open horizons to encompass broader undertakings, beyond the traditional, standardized approach that focuses extensively on imparting knowledge and achieving high grades. This novel rethink of our school systems calls into question conventional pedagogical approaches, once considered universally applicable; while in practice, they tragically prove insufficient and unfeasible (Robinson, 2015).

Around a century ago, Maria Montessori, in her advocacy for what might be called 'natural education,' rightly stated that "Education is not something which the teacher does, but a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being" (Montessori, 1964). The idea of spontaneity and naturalness in school may seem idealistic and perhaps romantic to many educational practitioners. However, this orientation underscores the need for a more dynamic, true-to-life education that directly addresses the authentic experiences of individuals in school spaces. Ideally, school activities should operate smoothly and naturally, not creating a pseudo-life that breeds apathy and indifference within the rigid rules of the institution. This essential humanistic life stream in school challenges simplistic cause-and-effect paradigms, promising a vibrant, nonlinear, and ongoing school-life process. School should be a universe bursting with life, in whatever form it may take. This simple, natural life must remain intact in school to play its full part, with projects reinforcing, not resisting, this natural life.

The argument in this study starts with the premise that the Moroccan educational landscape necessitates revitalized dynamism at the grassroots level (UNESCO, 2017/18). It centers on the relational dynamics within the school setting, specifically communication, and its myriad apparent shortcomings (Azouzi, 2018), rather than abstractly undertaking a comprehensive investigation into the nationwide pedagogical managerial aspects of the Moroccan educational system. It simply attempts to name weaknesses by their proper names.

Surely, a set of burning questions troubles the minds of many educators in schools. In such a case, every answer to these inquiries doesn't necessarily require formal instructions or dictations from distant educational 'headquarters' from the center. The original call, right away, is to initiate a move domestically in the first place, to handle such an alarming situation practically at school with localized maneuvers, energy, and hope; a sort of praxis inspired by reflection and action upon the educational world close at hand to transform it (Freire, 1970).

This daring move does not envisage drawing the educational condition to a final close, which might be a crazy idea. It is, rather, a venturesome attempt to start redressing what can be redressed locally. All the same, it is an urgent, unavoidable exercise to be done first before switching to further action.

A brief look at what is happening in our schools, or maybe an impromptu conversation with educators, students, or even parents is generally heralded by incessant complaints and trading accusations. Each one grips a certain malaise, a rampart that is practically felt to thwart the

level of communication among stakeholders. That being the case, dialogue, somehow, should be rearranged again at school. This common mood is current and manifests a general dissatisfaction with the ongoing communication in educational institutions.

Paradoxically, the disposition to communicate is essential for all educational stakeholders to foster a positive energetic school environment. Without redressing such a dialogic anomaly, all far-fetched theoretical initiatives will, in principle, fail to advance any 'educational recipe' to the status quo. Addressing the articulated or even unexpressed melancholy is an academic emergency. Using the available soft skills one possesses, practitioners in the field have to bust a move and take a hand on the ground to unlock communication. This effort will at least alleviate one of the major discomforts troubling students, teachers, administrative staff, and families. It is one of the initial points to be addressed domestically in the agenda of any school reform with due consideration that the student's voice is to be esteemed and valued. With this pressure release, a new breeze will flow into the school atmosphere.

Now there is a growing interest in addressing the student's experience voiced personally with no intermediary. Students' opinions have always been narrated or expressed as a reported speech by adults. The report is not always that authentic. Educators, from various positions, have gradually shown outstanding enthusiasm and a promising prevision of the role that student's attitudes and ideas may play in creating a synergistic atmosphere of communication at school. It will make a difference if it is handled with the necessary care.

Many countries have incorporated the pupil's voice into official policies and directives while advocating for youth participation in decisions that directly affect them. Creating an environment that promotes student engagement is closely related to issues such as authority, values, and the philosophy of the individual in education.

Promoting open communication among students and educators invigorates a new dynamism within high schools. There is a need for educators to reflect on students' reticence in expressing their opinions if they wish to embark on the project of revitalizing our schools. Nevertheless, the task is challenging; it is inevitable to regenerate enthusiasm and engagement in the school environment. As Paulo Freire declared with conviction, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire, 1970).

## An Overview of the Moroccan Educational Context

The Moroccan public school system is plagued by significant challenges that stem from a multitude of complex factors. This has created an environment that is often unresponsive and, at times, inhumane. Ironically, the warm human relationships that schools are supposed to nurture are severely lacking in this climate. Consequently, many Moroccan schools find themselves in unfriendly contexts characterized by problematic behaviors, including student silence and disengagement.

A comprehensive and promising school reform cannot rely on a single, unique solution. Instead, it requires a multifaceted approach that integrates various theoretical and practical strategies. This study embraces one promising route to address the inhospitable situation within Moroccan schools: empowering student voices.

The shortcomings of the Moroccan school system have become notorious over recent decades. Despite numerous plans and reform programs implemented in Moroccan educational policy, and despite substantial investments in financial and human resources, only minimal improvements have been achieved. These initiatives have ultimately failed, leading to the well-known official declaration that Moroccan education is approaching a state of "cardiac arrest." This dire warning remains imminent unless bold and operational actions are taken.

One of the lessons learned from the immense wasted efforts since independence is that true reforms can only be achieved through a transformative, bottom-up educational approach. This approach emphasizes the crucial role of efficient communication rooted in the inclusion of student voices. By addressing the evident challenges in relational dynamics within the school setting, particularly the lack of genuine communication, meaningful educational reform can be achieved locally, fostering a more responsive and inclusive learning environment.

Promoting open communication between students and educators can invigorate dynamism within schools. Tackling student reticence in expressing their opinions is one of the cryptic codes to be unraveled for revitalizing the rigid structure of our schools. Although the task is challenging, it is necessary to forge ahead to regenerate life and engagement in the school environment. Paulo Freire's perspective is pertinent in this context: "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students."

Instead of relying exclusively on central plans from senior pedagogical management at the national level, the focus should be directed towards the relational aspects within the school setting and its deficiencies. While many educational reforms appear to falter, authentic change can materialize at localized levels. It is widely acknowledged that Moroccan schools lack genuine communication among stakeholders, with the primary absentee being the students' voices. John Dewey underscored the need for continuous and inclusive dialogue and the readiness to learn. He emphasized, "The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning."

The desire to progress in learning often encounters an atmosphere that blocks dialogue. This communication gap in schools necessitates thorough reflection to understand why students' voices remain unheard. Despite theoretical and official assertions that identify students as central to the educational process, practical implementation often reveals a disconnect. Teaching is, after all, a human process, not an insipid mechanical engineering. This prompts a cultural reconsideration of the concept of youth in the current educational context. Cultivating a humane ethos at school, rooted in equitable adult-youth relationships, could significantly enhance student engagement in high school institutions.

The true value of an educational experience transcends mere adherence to the syllabus, reaching beyond textbooks and classroom lessons. The dynamic exchange of emotions between students and educators, coupled with the constant challenges within the educational environment, creates a rich mosaic of knowledge and personal development for both students and educators. This type of experience fosters flexibility, sharpens skills, and provides profound insights into school life. A shift in approach is urgently needed to launch radical change and avoid stifling creativity in schools. As Sir Ken Robinson aptly stated, "Education doesn't need to be reformed — it needs to be transformed."

The insistence on imposing top-down reforms has left the Moroccan public school system suffering from unresolved flaws, resulting in an unresponsive and often inhumane environment that contradicts its mandate to foster warm human relations. Many schools harbor an unfriendly atmosphere characterized by frequent disruptive behaviors. Comprehensive school reform necessitates a practical approach that empowers students, giving them a voice in school matters.

Moreover, meaningful student involvement could address behavioral issues and contribute to a more hospitable school climate. The marginalization of student voices undermines the core of the educational enterprise, necessitating their rehabilitation as active participants. Meaningful student engagement has the potential to invigorate this lifeless environment. When students perceive their participation as valuable and their ideas respected, they become enthusiastic contributors, categorically transforming the school landscape.

Humanizing schools involves genuinely listening to student voices rather than using them tokenistically in photos and reports. This approach can transform the school climate, promoting non-violence, civility, and a better learning environment. Student involvement is crucial for improving school settings, as its absence leads to uninspiring school experiences. One of the remaining options available to educators is to recognize and encourage student voices in schools and to find novel ways and opportunities to ensure the visibility of these marginalized voices.

Rehabilitating students' status from passive subjects to accountable agents within the school environment is pivotal for educational progress. Despite the official rhetoric utilizing student-centered approaches, students are often marginalized or superficially included in decision-making processes. The concept of paternalism, or adultism, wherein adults view children through a biased lens, enhances their marginalization, thereby reinforcing their disengagement. Accountability and belonging within school communities flourish through efficient communication where students' voices are not excluded.

Culturally, this condition may be embedded in our social imaginary. We live in a society that considers unreserved articulate children to be vulgar and unrefined. Conversely, the community values a hushed, passive child, treating them as well-mannered and cordial. No voice is louder than the voice of the adult. The dominant language is that of the mature grown-up, both domestically and publicly. The final word belongs to the father, the teacher, the boss—the one who holds power.

On the other hand, empowering students through meaningful involvement offers a promising path for addressing behavioral issues, improving school climate, and fostering student well-being and academic success in Moroccan public schools. By prioritizing student voices and reshaping power dynamics, schools can create inclusive environments conducive to holistic student development.

## The Essential Call to Bring a Human Touch to School

Humanizing schools involves creating a softer, more compassionate atmosphere within educational institutions. Many adults, often unintentionally, damage the school environment through their authoritative actions and attitudes. While the term "damage" may seem harsh, it accurately reflects the destructive impact of such behavior. If confidential listening sessions were provided for students to share their experiences of mistreatment by adults, the results

might be surprising. The psychological scars they carry may remain unhealed (Miller, 1990). Acknowledging the harm caused by adult behavior is the first step toward improving school life.

We often operate within a cultural paradigm that enables certain practices while banning others to ensure what we assume is success and safety. We grow up believing in the way we were taught, seeing it as the secure path to achieving desired outcomes without difficulty. We unquestioningly presume that adults should teach children to obey authority without ever questioning whether this truly ensures serenity, safety, and peace (Freire, 1970). However, it's crucial to critically reconsider assumptions that are taken for granted.

This mindset has deep cultural roots. Children have been disciplined to learn to keep their place, believing that staying within their assigned roles means living in peace. No change and no challenge are seen as pathways to safety. As teachers, we assume that such treatment is beneficial: "I blame you, I hurt you because I love you." "I do it for your good." "I make you uncomfortable to teach you life and happiness" (Miller, 1990). Students experiencing such abuse, especially in challenging subjects like math, recognize the pain and are well aware of this abusive conduct.

Humanizing school helps us reconnect with students by treating them as humans with rights and choices. It assists them in becoming less reliant on us for food, clothing, and other necessities. Success should not be measured by providing appropriate answers on exam sheets. Obedience should not be the ultimate goal (Dewey, 1938). This is not a call for a shift from control to permissiveness; rather, it calls for moving away from a damaging philosophy where rules are rigidly imposed. We need to move toward an equity-based, co-creative experience. This involves thinking along with students about how to achieve goals, conceptualize change, adapt to reality, and work out solutions.

We are in the process of considering the equity of need and human value. Human curiosity and critical thinking are at stake. This approach builds success, reducing trauma, anxiety, and injury (Robinson, 2011). Students are not machines that chase after success or a future. We should not sacrifice our relationships in the pursuit of deceptive success. The task of education is not perfection but rather to reduce harm in the school context. We should exercise power with students, not over them. Human beings resist unfairness. Paternalism is embedded in the culture of policy institutions, preparing children to be adults in a manner that adults prefer (Freire, 1970).

Meaningfully involving students in school life and treating them as responsible partners can bring about the desired change—something that reform projects since the creation of the Higher Council for Education (CSE) and even before have failed to achieve. The effective presence of students as real agents in school is crucial for stirring decisive educational progress. Alongside their voices, life could gradually return to schools (UNESCO, 2015).

Rehabilitating the status of students from controlled, tamed subjects to real, accountable agents within the school environment has often been a weak point in most educational reconsiderations. Students seem to be absent in their presence. Although almost all educational reports and surveys are conducted with a strong focus on student-centered approaches that cherish the active role of learners, they are often excluded and marginalized in practice, or at best, poorly included as real operating agents (UNESCO, 2015).

The preliminary stage in addressing this issue is to explore why students are systematically neglected and silenced in schools. One key term used to elucidate this attitude is adultism—a tendency of adults to view children and their problems from a biased, adult perspective. An important educational debate should be invested in examining the social representations of this adult-centric mindset, which marginalizes and manipulates youth based on their perceived immaturity. Literature on students' voices and their potential contribution to improving the school climate should be thoroughly explored (Fielding, 2004).

The workings of power relations, as well as the concepts of communication, dialogue, participation, and partnership, are operational in this context. Restorative justice is a communicative approach that probes into the depths and reasons behind school violence, which is often the logical outcome of a strained atmosphere within schools. It focuses on helping humanize the school environment by shifting away from punitive approaches to misbehavior, emphasizing accountability of actions and repairing harm rather than punishing the presumed wrongdoer. Its final goal is to reintegrate students back into the school community through caring communication and fostering a sense of belonging (Zehr, 2002)

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