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## Focus: Student Voice

# Youths in Action – Intergenerational Leadership

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

Young people informing their community about environmental problems, presenting about their experiences with dual credit classes in high school, and organizing field trips to a local college – all of these are aspects of leadership modeled by youths from neighborhoods that outsiders often claim don't value education.

The community-based organization, ARISE (A Resource in Service for Equality), has had a dynamic youth involvement and youth leadership approach since its inception in 1987 by Sr. Gerrie Naughton. Early on, ARISE members saw a need for summer activities for children in the most-isolated colonias where city and county services were lacking or nonexistent.

Every June, hundreds of children now participate in games, learning activities and physical activities that are wholesome and entertaining. To achieve this with very little money, teenagers and pre-teens from the communities take on the role of mentors and guides for the children. This volunteer activity has persisted, and there are now many adults today who remember participating as children or youth mentors.

Just as ARISE has always had a strong base in seeking social justice, the youths have taken on important community issues. For example, training in ecological justice helped them focus on some pervasive problems in their neighborhoods. One that everyone there lives with is a stench

that comes from stagnant water. A group of 20 youths went through some training that highlighted issues of environmental justice, and they launched a campaign to inform the community and to present testimony to the city council and the county commissioners on the issue.

One offending source of the pollution is a water treatment plant that belongs to the city of Alamo, Texas. As an interim measure, the youths were able to secure large fans at the plant to disperse the offending odors more quickly. And some long-term plans have been put in place to remedy the situation altogether. Other pockets of stagnant water also are being targeted for clean-up.

The students are carrying out their expanded campaign to inform residents with house-to-house fliers and informational visits about the problem, their rights and what actions the community can take to resolve these threats to health and well-being in their neighborhoods. The group, *Jóvenes del Valle en Acción* (Valley Youths in Action), was even able to have their issue taken to the United Nations through the cooperation of some Sisters (nuns) who live in New York.

Relatedly, the students have demonstrated their leadership in their love for their community by getting services from the county to pick up trash and large objects where previously only brush  
*(cont. on Page 2)*

*“Whether students are in a classroom, a meeting or a public hearing, they must be active participants. The context must presume them to be the intelligent agents they are, capable of contributing important and essential ideas. Our students possess unique insights and powerful gifts!”*

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

(Youths in Action – Intergenerational Leadership, continued from Page 1)



Ariss Cocino and Ramona Casas conduct a survey with colonia residents and disseminate information about the environmental pollution in the neighborhood. Photo courtesy of ARISE.

was collected. When elderly folk don't have the strength or ability to put out large objects for trash collection, the youths do it. And they patrol their neighborhoods to reduce trash and eyesores.

These young people range in ages from 14 to 20, from middle school to college. Their leadership has been demonstrated in their information campaign and their testimony before city, county and federal agencies. And they are currently collecting signatures for a large public meeting where they will provide testimony.

The youths are all ARISE volunteers and, along with their parents, are members of the ARISE South Tower Comunitario PTA. They have learned through this project what *ecology* means and are now proficient in terms like *environmental impact*. Science has become very real and comprehensible through this project.

Using an example like this, it would be quite easy for an enterprising science teacher to make connections in the classroom. The teacher could



Bricieda Cosino, Andrea Guzmán, Lizbeth Ramos, Abril Cosino, Yajaira González, Ariss Cosino and Lupita Pérez present findings and make requests of the elected officials in the Alamo City Council. Photo courtesy of ARISE.

lead students to introduce the elements and the biological processes that cause such a stench; to identify the health hazards that local pollution brings; and to integrate so many other concepts that would otherwise be dull, uninteresting and unintelligible if only presented with a science textbook and a lecture.

These youth know well the pronouncements that are made about them by people who are ill informed. And it is true that these teenagers live in extremely poor neighborhoods. It is also true that they are committed, compassionate young people surrounded by supportive families and a community that is listening.

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*This article was written in part from information given by Lupita Perez, ARISE young staff member and supporter of the youth projects, and Eva Carranza, current and founding president of the ARISE South Tower Comunitario PTA.*



**See our photo slideshow of Youths in Action**  
<http://budurl.com/IDRAyvi6>



**See a sample lesson, "Growing Bacteria in a Culture," from Minority Women in Science: Forging the Way**  
<http://budurl.com/IDRAmwsL>

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# The Role of Conversation in the Classroom – Promoting Student Voice through Instructional Dialogue

by Paula Johnson, M.A.

## The Challenge

Teachers know it is not enough to be proficient in the subject area they are teaching. They also must have an understanding of pedagogy, or how students learn, particularly across the diverse learning environments we see today. A key strength is the ability to employ instructional strategies that engage students in academic discourse. In order to assess what students are thinking, we have to get them talking. This strategy is instrumental in the development of academic vocabulary for all students, especially English learners.

Thus, there is a call for professional development that guides teachers, and in turn students, in redefining their roles in the development of knowledge (Schoen, et al., 2003). Providing teachers with professional learning in the use of instructional conversations and higher-order questioning is a critical element in laying the foundation for meaningful learning.

How do peer-conversations about a student's approach to a problem or conjecture regarding an idea develop critical thinking skills? What constitutes meaningful discourse? Is it possible to effectively increase understanding and engagement by delivering instruction through a student-centered dialogue model? In this article, we investigate the role that conversation plays throughout instruction toward building teacher capacity and student self-efficacy in subject matter knowledge.

## The Purpose

To effectively meet the challenges of an increasingly diverse population of learners, we must employ a student-centered approach to teaching and learning that not only relays instructional content, but also engages students in authentic activities that elicit disciplinary discourse to construct knowledge (Anderson, 2007).

Carpenter, et al., (2004) proposed that students who only know what has been taught to them, without any relevant connections or meaning, will not have the capacity to apply what they have

learned in new situations. This transfer of knowledge is what has been lacking for far too long in the areas of comprehension and retention.

The goal of instruction is to prepare students to be problem solvers with the ability to overcome unforeseeable challenges. Therefore, we must provide an environment where students are willing to engage in conversations that allow them to communicate their ideas. Teachers' awareness of students' knowledge can more thoroughly support meaningful learning and critical thinking (Carpenter, et al., 2004). Unfortunately, in the traditional classroom, students are not linguistically involved in the lesson. They are the receivers of information, rarely producing opinions or suppositions. Without student voice, teachers cannot readily assess their level of understanding.

## The Process

*Instructional conversation* is a form of a discussion-based lesson that develops students' conceptual and linguistic skills through guided discourse where all students are held accountable for participation (Goldsmith, 2013). Students engage in scaffolded exchanges with their peers and the instructor to communicate their personal understandings and negotiate meaning of content on various levels. This use of student conversations supports the students' development of academic language and vocabulary. Teachers seek opportunities to reinforce correct pronunciation, definitions and speech patterns by modeling paraphrases of student responses to guided questions (Echevarría, et al., 2012). These interactions also provide valuable assessment data that reveal errors in reasoning, computation or logic (Vanderhye & Demers, 2007).

As Johnson, et al., (2013) describe: "Substantive conversations require considerable interaction that is on task and involves higher order thinking processes during the negotiation process (i.e., drawing conclusions, challenging ideas, asking questions). The discussion can have guidance  
(cont. on Page 4)

*Providing students with multiple opportunities to discuss ideas with fellow students promotes peer-supported strategic thinking.*

(The Role of Conversation in the Classroom – Promoting Student Voice through Instructional Dialogue, continued from Page 3)

but is not completely scripted or controlled by the teacher.” Active involvement of all students is necessary to promote an improved collective understanding of the content. In order for students to generate authentic discourse in a coherent manner, they must be willing to engage. Teachers must provide a safe environment where students are free to express their thinking without fear.

The use of the Think-Pair-Share (TPS) model also aids in increasing student confidence (Goldsmith, 2013). This form of turn-and-talk occurs after a teacher poses a question, when students then pause and think about their reply, pair up with a partner, and then share their responses with each other. The affective filter is lowered, and students are able to engage in a short discussion free from the eyes and ears of the rest of the class. Once the students are brought back together, they all have had the opportunity to fine tune their answer. Students who are still hesitant when called upon will have the support of their partner.

Providing students with multiple opportunities to discuss ideas with fellow students promotes peer-supported strategic thinking. Finding the “right” answer becomes secondary to discovering the process or reasoning behind a concept. The integration of this method of instruction with academically rich vocabulary and higher-order questioning is especially effective with English learners (Goldsmith, 2013).

### The Results

Teachers using substantive conversations encourage students to bring to mind their own ideas and views of a topic before engaging in rich dialogue with their peers to identify common understandings and key information, and addressing any confusion about the problem. This method of inquiry enables students to collectively think through a problem before actually beginning to solve it.

For example, a pair of chemistry students might hypothesize possible outcomes of an investigation before conducting the experiment. They scrutinize the problem as a doctor might examine a patient before determining treatment. Students learn to look for clues regarding how to approach a task or problem. They are able to view the work before them from a situational perspective, considering the academic vocabulary involved and call on prior experiences to generate solutions.

Conversation plays a vital role in the modern cycle of instruction. In order for students to begin thinking like scholars, they must be placed in an environment that supports a community of practice that operates according to scholarly behaviors. Professional learning activities for teachers must include strategies that effectively increase engagement, critical thinking, and dialogue as methods of developing student agency.

Providing students with numerous opportunities to contribute to thought-provoking discussions surrounding content increases student participation and willingness to present their ideas related to topics of instruction. Moreover, as teachers improve their capacity for using higher-order questions to guide student discourse, they also are able to more readily perceive student misconceptions and redirect students with questions that allow them to revisit their thinking, dialogue with their peers, and choose a different approach or conclusion (Johnson, et al., 2013).

Student-centered classrooms that employ substantive conversations promote voice, choice and learner identity. In this type of environment, students learn to negotiate meaning through a structure that shifts the responsibility of learning from teachers to the students.

### Resources

Anderson, R. “Being a Mathematics Learner: Four Faces of Identity,” *The Mathematics Educator* (2007).

Carpenter, T.P., & J.A. Dossey, J.L. Koehler (Eds.). *Classics in Mathematics Education Research* (Reston, Va.: National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2004).

Echevarria, J., M. Vogt, & D. Short. *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model*, fourth edition (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Education, Inc., 2012).

Goldsmith, W. “Enhancing Classroom Conversation for All Students,” *Phi Delta Kappan* (2013) 94(7), 48-52

Johnson, P., & V. Betancourt, A. Villarreal, R. Rodríguez. *Synthesis of Effective Teaching Strategies and Practices – A Handbook for Secondary Mathematics and Science Teachers* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2013).

Schoen, H.L., & K.J., Cebulla, K.F. Finn, C. Fi. “Teacher Variables That Relate to Student Achievement When Using a Standards-Based Curriculum,” *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* (2003).

Vanderhye, C.M., & C.M. Zmijewski Demers. “Assessing Students’ Understanding through Conversations,” *Teaching Children Mathematics* (2007).

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**INFOGRAPHIC** Download our list the seven strategies for instruction of English learners in science  
<http://budurl.com/IDRA7science>

**PODCAST** Listen to Substantive Conversation in the Classroom – IDRA Classnotes  
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## Students Become Leaders in their Community to Support Peers on the Path Toward College

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

A group of about 20 student leaders from the community-based ARISE Las Milpas center have been asking some key questions: Why can't I take advanced math courses even if I already have taken the minimum required for graduation? What does it cost to attend an out-of-state college? Where are the resources for financial aid? How can we help our parents know about these things?

Carla Judith Reyna, a young adult and coordinator of youth activities at ARISE Las Milpas, has supported this group of middle school and high school students with planning, carrying out activities and recruiting persons who can be resources to them. A sophomore in college, Carla interrupted her college studies to spend a year supporting these activities.

Some of the resource people she recruited were students from their neighborhoods who had college experience. Pedro Nepomuceno (whom IDRA highlighted in our November-December 2015 issue) spoke to the students about the college experience. He has a bachelor's degree from Texas A&M University and is currently in nursing school at the UT Health Science Center in San Antonio.

The youth leaders come from neighborhoods that have had little if any support in the past for these efforts. The students are breaking ground, ascribing to the #AllMeansAll hashtag. They agree with the goals set by their innovative school district that every high school graduate will already have earned college credit hours while still in high school. Some plan to graduate with an associate's degree from the local community college.

One of the students, Brandon Márquez, is a sophomore at an early college high school, where he is currently taking a full load in high school along with some dual credit college courses. His Algebra II and World Geography classes are taught in Spanish. His mother co-founded

the ARISE Cesar Chavez Comunitario PTA. Brandon began his volunteer work with ARISE in his colonia of Las Milpas when he was 11 years old and had just completed fifth grade.

He and his friends mentored first and second graders. They led reading activities, crafts like making bracelets, and physical games. He considers working with young children and peers an important part of leadership.

Brandon also has served as part of the youth team at his ARISE Las Milpas Center. A few years ago, his team chose to make college preparation a priority. All year, they participated in workshops and retreats to learn more. They organized and co-led meetings where counselors and college students were invited to speak to them and to other members of the community. That year culminated with a field trip to a college campus, where their guides were part of the group of college students who had adopted them as college mentors.

Brandon and his friends are active at their ARISE community center, which is located in a barrio with serious economic challenges but with an abundance of human resources and energy. They volunteer to help older folk, do area clean-up and get involved with the activities planned by the Comunitario PTA. Last year, the Comunitario PTA worked with others in the community, including the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network, to conduct a survey in their neighborhoods to find out what families knew about graduation requirements and preparation for college. (See Bahena, 2015)

As a follow-up to the survey, Brandon and his peers participated in a Saturday event where students presented to the families about several key educational issues related to high school graduation and college entrance. The students and families were presenters in sessions about dual credit classes and why these were significant. (cont. on Page 6)



Brandon Márquez carrying an environmental justice banner in the annual Dia del Niño parade through the colonias in the South Tower area of South Texas. Photo courtesy of ARISE.

### IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

For more information about the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or [contact@idra.org](mailto:contact@idra.org).

Additional resources are available online at [www.idra.org/South\\_Central\\_Collaborative\\_for\\_Equity](http://www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity) funded by the U.S. Department of Education

(Students Become Leaders in their Community to Support Peers on the Path Toward College, continued from Page 5)

cant; full biliteracy that results in biliteracy honors at graduation; dropout recovery that leads to college enrollment and success; and adult education that is giving their parents opportunities to learn English and continue their education.

Students were the emcees, presenters, guides and participants at this Mini Mesa Comunitaria. Adults helped with planning and preparation, and the students shone as leaders with great verve and assertiveness. Many had never presented at a conference like this, much less to adults. The student voice was powerful, informative, moving and highly motivating to all who attended.

The environment of service and community spirit that ARISE engenders clearly shows in both Carla and Brandon. They are challenging counselors and others who attempt to dissuade their peers from taking advanced courses in math and science. These youth are challenging the stereotypes of their neighborhoods and peers, saying instead, “Yes, we are college material. Yes, we can excel in difficult courses. No, we do not wish to take the easier routes much less drop out.” In doing so, they are serving their vision to earn college degrees and make their families “very proud of our accomplishments.”

From field trips to colleges, to having high school and college counselors give them tips and support, these young people are demonstrating leadership for college preparation and admission.

### Resources

Bahena, S. “Our children could get lost’ – Rio Grande Valley Parents Gather to Discuss Policy Implications,” *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, November-December 2015).

IDRA. “College Students Describe What a School’s College-Going Culture Really Means,” *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, November-December 2015).

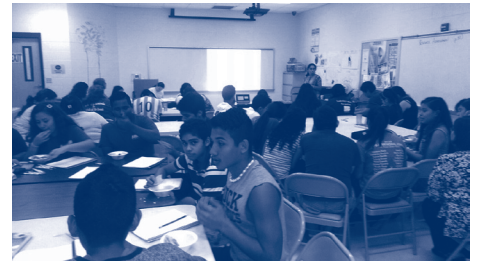
*Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is a senior education associate at IDRA. Comments and questions can be directed to him via email at aurelio.montemayor@idra.org.*

**INFOGRAPHIC** See the Equal Voice RGV HB5 Community Survey Infographic (bilingual)  
<http://budurl.com/EVRGVigPDF>

**WEBSITE** See our student interviews, “College Students Describe What a School’s College-Going Culture Really Means”  
<http://budurl.com/IDRAcbdS>



Carla Judith Reyna presenting at a college access workshop for the ARISE Las Milpas Center youth and families. Photo courtesy of ARISE.



Brandon Marquez with his peers discussing information about college registration processes and financial aid. Photo courtesy of ARISE.

## Teenage Voices

### On Their Experience in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program

The IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is a research-based, highly successful cross-age tutoring program. With a 98 percent success rate, the program shows what happens when students suddenly feel valued for who they are and for their contributions to others.



“The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has made me a better student after I experienced being a teacher and having to take responsibility and being a role model to my students. I have learned that the way you treat them and talk to them can change the outcome of how the students act toward you and others.”

– Elijah Peña Zamora, Middle School, South San Antonio ISD

“Sometimes I stress because I think I’m not good enough... Sometimes, I would miss a day of school, and my tutees would ask me, ‘Where were you? Why didn’t you come?’ That was the moment I realized that I was a part of their lives and that they missed me. I felt important.”

– Valeria Olvera, Treviño Middle School, La Joya ISD

“Since I became a tutor for the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, my life has completely changed, leading me to a good path... There are teachers that look at me differently, and it’s all good.”

– Lourdes Hernandez, NOW Academy, Los Angeles USD

“My tutees have modified my life in ways that make me feel special and that I truly have a purpose... They were the first ones to notice I got glasses and new shoes. They were the only ones to look into my eyes and know that I was lighthearted on the outside, but inconsolable on the inside. I could truthfully say that they’ve been the only people to make me feel like I have a justification in this world of ours.”

– Faye Galvan, Treviño Middle School, La Joya ISD

“Becoming a tutor in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has helped me be patient and learn how others learn. Tutoring has changed my life because I learned that all the children aren’t the same and that you need to get creative so that everyone can learn and see what you are trying to say.”

– Cassandra de La Garza, Odessa High School

**WEBSITE** Learn more about the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program  
<http://budurl.com/IDRAVYP>

**PODCAST** Listen to tutor voices on IDRA’s Classnotes Podcast Episode, “They start calling my name (on being a Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutor)”  
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**VIDEO** See video clips about the program  
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# Implementation of New Texas Graduation Requirements Needs Further Study

## Ready Texas: Stakeholder Convening Proceedings Report Released

Texas adopted substantial changes to high school curricula in 2013 (under House Bill 5). Policy-makers, education and business leaders, families, and students are now faced with the question of how implementation of those changes is impacting the state of college readiness and success in Texas.

Comprehensive research is needed to understand the implications for various student groups and Texas as a whole. Some research and evaluation is already underway; other questions need to be examined.

The Ready Texas: Stakeholder Convening took place February. This convening, led by IDRA and carried out in partnership with UTeach at UT Austin, brought together education, community, policy, foundation, business and philanthropic leaders to discuss the future of post-secondary education in Texas and to provide input on the design of a statewide study of HB5 implementation. The convening was made possible through a grant from Greater Texas Foundation.

Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO, said: “We must make sure that every student has access to high quality teaching and a quality curriculum that prepares them for post-secondary education. As researchers, we play a critical role by examining policies and practices that contribute to students’ success or failure. Together, the future is in our hands.”

Participants and other stakeholders contributed questions, concerns and recommendations through the pre-convening stakeholder survey, in-person gathering, and follow up evaluation. Their insights were invaluable to understanding what stakeholders most want to know about how the implementation of HB5 is unfolding and what this implies for Texas students and post-secondary preparation, access and success. Their input will inform research on the most important aspects of HB5 and ensuring that we build on existing studies and evaluation.

Dr. Wynn Rosser, Greater Texas Foundation President & CEO, said: “What happens in Texas is important. One in 10 K-12 students in the nation is a Texan. One in 14 first-time-in-college students in the nation is a Texan. We have more kids than some states have total population. So we’re dealing with a scope and a scale that matters.”

In contrast to the new graduation requirements and removal of the more rigorous courses from the standard curriculum, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has established the 60x30TX plan, which serves as the long-range strategic plan for Texas higher education, with the main goal that 60 percent of Texans ages 25 to 34 will have a certificate or degree by 2030. The current figure is 38 percent.

Stakeholders raised key questions about...

- whether and how the implementation of HB5 might impact the overall state of post-secondary preparation in Texas;
- whether school districts have the capacity and resources to provide a full range of rigorous course options – and to offer these options equitably both within and across school districts;
- whether families and students have the information they need to navigate new requirements and opportunities and whether counselors have the resources to support them;
- whether STEM course offerings and course taking are preparing students of all backgrounds for success;
- whether curriculum tracking is an issue or not;
- what we can learn from challenges and best practices; and
- whether Texas graduates will have the preparation they need for the college and career dreams to which they aspire.

Importantly, across sectors, stakeholders seek to assure that students of all backgrounds and in

every zip code have access to a curriculum that prepares them to realize their college and career aspirations. They also underscored the importance of further research that informs policy and practice.

The proceedings report released today captures highlights from the project and is available online. The report explores pathways, trends and preparation for the future of Texas; student aspirations; school district and community responses to HB5; Ready Texas survey findings and scan of research; and an overview of stakeholder input.

We look forward to continuing the conversation about curriculum quality and access and about post-secondary readiness and success for Texas students. Access to and success in higher education, in a range of fields, will help drive new innovation, discovery and creative contributions to the economy, our communities and our quality of life.



**REPORT** Ready Texas: Stakeholder Convening Proceedings Report  
<http://budurl.com/IDRArTX16p>

**PODCAST** Texas Higher Ed Commissioner on College Access – IDRA Classnotes  
<http://budurl.com/IDRApod16r>

**WEBSITE** Ready Texas: Stakeholder Convening Presentations and other resources  
<http://budurl.com/IDRAeNrTX>



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