

Protocol: Student Fishbowl Conversation
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Created as part of the Teaching Our Cities Project (www.teachcity.org)

Purpose

- To create a space where young people can talk openly with each other, and adults hear from young people, about their shared and diverse experiences at urban, environmentally themed schools.
- To privilege student voice, and to promote exchange among young people, in a way that elevates their point of view in conversations about school change
- To support the development of a community of young changemakers, working together and with adults to improve schools.

Overview

In a fishbowl conversation, a group of participants form a circle facing inward for a small group discussion. Listeners form another circle around the outside, listening in on the conversation. Fishbowls can function in a variety of ways. Because the priority here is to privilege student voice, students form a tight inner circle and adults sit around the outside. Adults remain listeners for the first part of the fishbowl, and are given a chance to ask probing questions in the final ten minutes. We have facilitated this activity with 20 student participants and 20 educators; a smaller group could also work well!

Before the Fishbowl

- Facilitator shares questions with conversation participants several days in advance of the discussion.
- Facilitator can identify and meet in advance with one or more students who can help set the tone and invite other students to share openly. This student or these students can then play the primary role of facilitator during the fishbowl itself. This will allow the adult facilitator to step out of the conversation almost entirely.
- Facilitator meets with students before the fishbowl begins to (1) ask students what they already know about fishbowl conversations and help build shared understanding of what to expect, (2) invite them to read through the questions and identify which ones they are most interested in discussing. This discussion can happen the day of the fishbowl, or even better a few days in advance, and can also include a chance for students to have an initial conversation about the questions, and to identify the messages they most want to share with educators.

Opening the Conversation

The facilitator:

- Explains the fishbowl structure very briefly.
- Names the power dynamic that usually exists between students and adults in conversations about how schools should work.

- Sets expectations for students (drawing on pre-existing norms if this is a pre-existing group, or from norms identified during prep conversation): Share as openly and bravely as you feel comfortable. Listen and build on other people's ideas.
- Sets expectations for adults: Listen actively and silently. Pay attention to what's coming up for you: questions, enthusiasm, resistance, the desire to step in.
- Gives brief detail on how the conversation will go: Identify the questions that students are choosing to talk about, and explain the time involved
- Reiterates the opening question, and steps out of the circle.

The Fishbowl

Consider including a warm-up or icebreaking activity at the start of this fishbowl -- ideally student-led -- in order to get the conversation started.

Facilitator acts as timekeeper:

- Students share their names and school names.
- For 10 minutes, students talk about question #1
- For 10 minutes, students talk about question #2
- For 10 minutes, adults can ask clarifying and probing questions

Timings can be modified.

Closing the Fishbowl

Facilitator:

- Invites students to share what worked, and what we could do differently next time.
- Invites listeners to share what they appreciated about the conversation.
- Invites both groups to name for themselves (in writing, if you like) the idea or ideas they want to take out of the conversation.
- Encourages students and adults to continue to work on their capacity to speak and listen to each other.

Sample Questions

1. Please say your name, your school, and share an experience at your school that stands out to you.
2. Many of the schools represented in this room have a themes related to the environment, social justice, and sustainability. Take a minute to review the mission statement from CT River Academy.
 - a. What resonates with you, and why?
 - b. When you read the words, environment, social justice, sustainability, what do they mean either individually or collectively?
 - c. What words would you hope to see in your school's mission statement that may not already be included?
3. In what ways does your school live its' mission? In other words, how does your school demonstrate a commitment to the environment, social justice, and/or sustainability?

4. In what ways might your school better address the environment, sustainability, and social justice?
5. This project is called "Teaching our Cities". What do you want teachers and school leaders to know about the city and the neighborhood that you call *home*?
6. In this last question I want you to think about the most recent headlines in the news. In what ways has your school experience informed and empowered you to use your voice and take a stand on issues related to the environment and social justice?