Preface

O ne semester when we were both teaching, part time, in the same weekend undergraduate program for adult learners, we started spending Saturday evenings at a pizzeria. Our conversations turned to questions about students' experience of school. In talking, we found we held the common belief that learners possess important, and underrepresented, information about schooling. These conversations led to a research plan, and this book and related work became the fruit of that plan.

This work was in several ways both a continuation of our prior interests and a departure. Penny's main interest is in young adolescents, their needs, and the match of those needs with school. She has been examining middle school structures (Allen-Malley & Bishop, 2000; Bishop & Stevenson, 2000) and seeking understanding of young adolescents' perceptions of school (Boyer & Bishop, 2004) for some time. Literacy and progressive education were in Susanna's background. Some years before these conversations began, Susanna had interviewed college students and their instructor, Dr. Anne Okongwu, at Queens College, CUNY, about the content of a multicultural education course, and although the results were never completed, the different expressions of the "same" experience were uniquely represented by each person. Susanna's work in Africa with Dorian Haarhof, who uses drawing as a method of personal recall, and her efforts in the visual arts as well as prior research experience made the idea of student drawings as research tool attractive. In all of our prior interview studies, we had found that the combination of different modalities provided a fuller, more nuanced view of the phenomena than single reports would have done.

As we talked about ways to capture student experience in detail, we wanted to use interview, but also we felt a need to anchor experience in more than simple recall. We realized that a drawing of a single experience might provide just the anchor we sought. But before we could be certain, we tried out the drawing and interview idea with students of the ages we targeted. And, of course, we investigated prior research that had used drawing as a prime method of exploration. We were captured, and some years later, this work has emerged.

Only after embarking on our quest did we begin to question just what kind of work we were doing. Initially we viewed this as a research project, and in most ways that is what it was. But as we worked with the data the youngsters provided, more and more it was evident that there were strong applications to teachers' practice. It became increasingly apparent that our method could be a powerful form of action research for teachers. Our editor, Faye Zucker, was very helpful in working with us on this question. The result is this, a book about teaching with its base in research.

We write with a hope that several audiences may find this work useful. To turn to you, the reader: If you are a teacher, we offer this book as an example of how classroom practice can be enhanced by inviting students to offer feedback on pedagogy, and on their own learning styles, preferences, and needs. From time to time, we offer reflective questions in boxes throughout the text. We encourage you to pose these questions to yourself, thinking about the learners in your own classroom. If you are studying to become a teacher, think about how what the students present here resonates with your own schooling experience and what you hope to create in a classroom of your own.

If you are an action researcher or are interested in research, we offer the book as an example of classroom-based action research, in which teachers and students can ask important questions and systematically gather data to inform those questions. And if you are a qualitative researcher, we invite you to consider the implications of using participant-produced drawings as a valuable form of visual data to access participant perception.

The book is divided into seven chapters that reflect the themes revealed by students. The first chapter acquaints readers with the context of the study, the importance and complexity of student engagement, the method we used, and two of the students in our study. This chapter is meant to open and explain the whole process of sharing student perceptions of school.

Chapter 2 considers the social underpinnings of student experience. We did not ask the students about their social experiences in school, but few readers will be surprised to learn that the social life of schools is a very important part of these middle school-aged students' perceptions about school experience. We place this discussion early in the book to represent the pervasive impact that social experiences have on learning for young adolescents.

The students we consulted had very strong preferences when it came to pedagogy, and the processes they favor are presented in Chapter 3. Choice, relevance, and action emerge as central to student engagement. Several of these pedagogical themes are echoed in subsequent chapters as well, when we highlight specific content areas.

The first of these chapters, Chapter 4, focuses on how students perceive Math and themselves and on pedagogical approaches the students appreciate. In Chapter 5, the students' perceptions lead us to consider what middle school students need in reading instruction. Chapter 6 returns to issues of inquiry and communication in school experiences of the sciences and social sciences. In particular, a critical thinking approach to current events and writing in the content areas are highlighted as students describe their experiences.

We conclude with Chapter 7, in which we invite our readers to consider creating a classroom in which the learner is regularly consulted and honored as holding important information about schooling. The chapter includes a glimpse into two teachers' classrooms, as they invited their own students to draw and talk about their school experiences. Finally, we suggest ways to adapt the approach of drawing and interview in your own classroom.

We conclude Chapters 2–7 with suggestions about how you might use the ideas in your classrooms. Here we consider the implications of the students' perceptions for classrooms and teachers. We suggest methods that are in alignment with what the students identify as central to engaged learning. We do not want to assert that what is "true" for these middle school students is also "true" for your students. We think of this book as a beginning of a process that we hope you will continue. We hope you will consider how these middle schoolers portrayed their times of learning and use the approach we used in new and creative ways to find how your students experience learning. The journey begins with the material we present here, but it continues as you listen to your learners and adapt practice to deepen their learning engagement.