

Student Voice Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review has been undertaken to inform Phase Two of the Cognition Education Trust (CET) Student Voice project, which will examine how enhancing Student Voice influences school-wide decision-making to accelerate student progress and achievement. It is structured in response to research questions posed by the programme developers, and draws primarily from literature provided. This material includes published research, material extracted from NZ and international educational websites, opinion pieces from educational leaders in this area, and excerpts from books. The material was supplemented by a brief search for relevant complementary literature published since 2011 using key terms from the research questions, with a focus on systematic reviews.

Key findings from 2014 CET Student Voice Project: Phase One:

- Effective implementation of Student Voice requires a transparent, school-wide, planned and strategic approach, to ensure that students experience consistent practices and expectations across the school.
- Practice shifts are more likely to occur when the school's vision, policies and learning culture supports Student Voice and encourages evidence-informed risk-taking.
- The full commitment and engagement of school leaders is required.
- A fundamental shift in the teacher/student dynamic is often needed.
- Teachers need to see themselves as teachers of *all* the students in the school.
- Learners benefit when teachers can identify learning connections to prior learning and to learning across different areas.
- Student Voice and whānau engagement are part of the same picture. Lifting one can also lift the other.
- Schools must engage in constant evaluation of their progress towards improved learning outcomes.

Literature review summary

Student Voice

1. How is Student Voice defined when understood as a means of influencing school-wide decision-making to accelerate student progress and achievement?

The definition used in Phase One of the CET project is “the intentional collection and use of student’s thinking and feedback on their learning and using these voices to inform and improve teaching, learning and school-wide decision-making”.

Toshalis & Nakkula (2012, p. 23) claim that most Student Voice activity tends to be about encouraging student expression and involving consultation on student opinions, but argue that it is also about shared decision-making and student agency. “... Student Voice is a broad term describing a range of

activities that can occur in and out of school. It can be understood as expression, performance, and creativity and as co-constructing the teaching/learning dynamic. It can also be understood as self-determined goal-setting or simply as agency. ... Student Voice activities and programmes position students as the agents of change.”

Motivation and engagement are seen as important pre-requisites for student-centred learning, which is widely agreed to be the “foundation of Student Voice” (Chan, 2013).

Toshalis & Nakkula argue that Student Voice mechanisms for influencing school-wide decision-making are less-often utilized, yet essential for providing a more supportive school environment and improving learning outcomes.

The model is summarized in Figure 1 below, which illustrates a continuum of Student Voice activities ranging from opportunities to express their perspectives, through stages of increasing agency, to more explicit forms of student leadership.

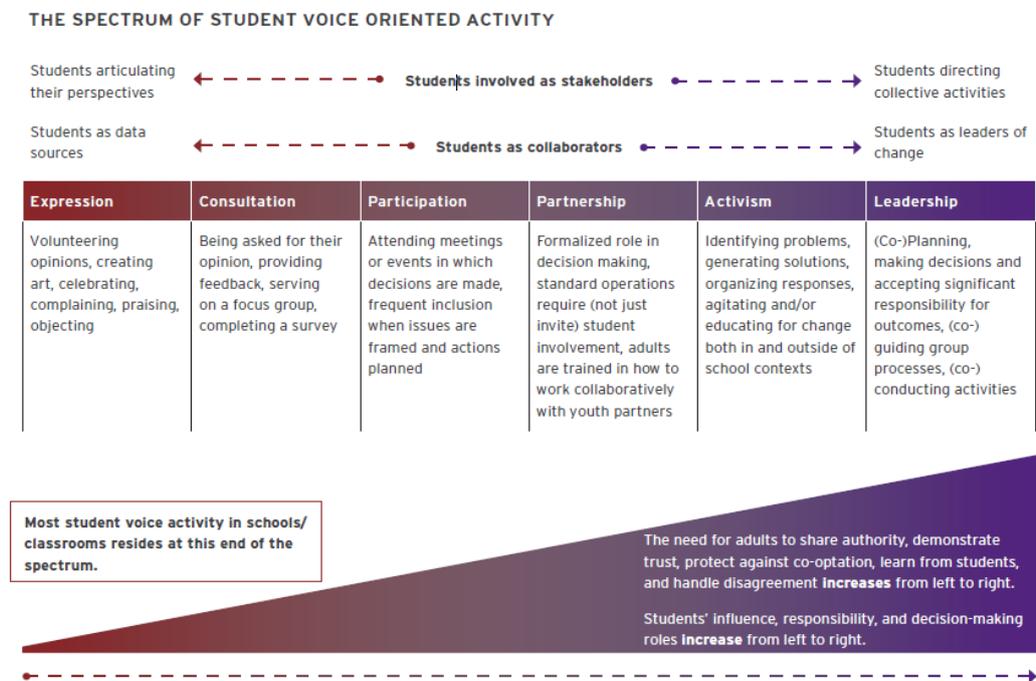


Figure 1. From Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 24.

- **Expression** – Students are given public outlets for their perspectives, but these may not always be taken on board.
- **Consultation** – Student opinions are more likely to be taken into account in decision making when they are consulted – for example through surveys or focus groups to get student’s views on particular learning or school environment issues. This is an important form of student voice as it provides students with a sense that their ideas are valued.
- **Participation** in decision-making processes – this can include creating more formalized roles for students in school improvement, for example through having input to research questions when students are to be surveyed about particular issues, about their school or community.

- **Partnership** - formalized role in decision-making processes accompanied by adults being trained in working collaboratively with students. This level of involvement requires adult-student partnership with shared responsibility for group outcomes. There are many studies that show that partnering with students can enhance the success of school reform and lead to gains in youth development.
- **Activism** – identifying problems, generating solutions, agitating/educating for change both inside and outside school – these activities typically centre around a set of issues students wish to change.
- **Leadership** – co-planning, making decisions and accepting significant responsibility for outcomes. Students are understood and supported as leaders and problem solvers, and provided with opportunities to increase their influence, responsibility and decision making alongside adults.

The NZ Teachers Council distinguishes between individual student level and systems level in describing Student Voice. At an individual level, “voices contribute to next steps learning (content and approaches) for individual students, their teacher and family/whānau – usually within classroom and home”. At a systems level, “voices contribute to changes to leadership, systems and structures that affect teachers and students across and beyond the whole school.”¹

Bolstad (2011) finds the term problematic because Student Voice tends to be used as a catch-all phrase, representing many different bodies of theory and practice, resulting in teachers being unsure of what is meant. She distinguishes between interpretations that are underpinned by an ‘improvement’ agenda (i.e. improving teaching and learning) and those underpinned by a ‘transformative’ agenda, which is more about enlisting students in changing the way schooling takes place. The latter is supported by US youth advocate Adam Fletcher, who argues that listening to students is not enough, and that “Student Voice is the individual and collective perspective and actions of young people within the context of learning and education”.²

At least one educator (Fox, 2012) argues that students should have a voice as early as possible about any school or learning-related issues that are relevant to them.

The definition used for Phase Two of the CET project will depend on how much emphasis is likely to be placed on the influence students ought to have on the whole school environment, in addition to their own learning. The current CET definition is broad enough to include some level of influence on school systems, but material found in this review supports a stronger emphasis on student agency and participation in broader decision-making.

2. How does Student Voice influence school-wide decision making in such a way that progress and achievement is accelerated (i.e. what are the causal mechanisms of change?)

The traditional school context may allow for consulting with students, but this can be the limit of their involvement and there is no guarantee that their input will be taken into account. Student Voice can be inherently challenging for schools, and may require a significant shift in the thinking of educators, administrators and policy makers. Furthermore the change needs to be authentic and sustainable to

¹ <https://www.teacherscouncil.govt.nz/sites/default/files/Using%20Student%20Voice.pdf>

² What is Student Voice About? Undated blog from Common Action website, retrieved 17 April 2015.

avoid students perceiving it as tokenistic (Simmons et al., 2014, p. 20). It's not surprising that in practice, most Student Voice activity tends to be limited to individually-oriented, class-level motivation and engagement processes.

The intention of Phase Two is to broaden the scope of activities more towards influencing school-wide decision making. The findings of Phase One are supported by Toshalis & Nakkula, (2012, p. 30) who identify that “a clear set of objectives and a co-ordinated plan that outlines roles, responsibilities and resources is paramount” and that “developing a baseline of trust, creating meaningful but equal roles among youth and adults, and providing ongoing professional development for all involved parties is the bare minimum” for success. Structures, practices, beliefs and values need to be altered to allow Student Voice to flourish (McQuillan, 2005).

Suggested causal mechanisms to facilitate this wider change include:

- a. Ongoing teacher development and training (the CET evaluation indicates that Phase One workshops have been well-received and resource needs to be set aside for these to continue)
- b. Wider CET engagement with schools and parents needs to be planned for to further develop a supportive professional environment for all teachers and encourage uptake and better understanding of Student Voice principles beyond the school gates
- c. Investigation of how other related programmes running in the participating schools might support and strengthen Student Voice activities (e.g., Culture Counts, Visible Learning, Health Promoting Schools).

Subsidiary questions

- 3. How does Student Voice contribute to student agency and personal development? For example, what is the role of Student Voice in being a visible learner and an assessment capable learner?**

Toshalis & Nakkula (2012, p. 2) argue that student *motivation and engagement* is fundamental to learning, and that *agency* is the key to Student Voice. Teachers need developmental support to understand the connections among motivation, engagement and Student Voice. These three constructs are seen as fundamentally inter-related. Thoughts, feelings, behaviours and socialization processes inform the nature of motivation, engagement, and Student Voice, in ways that are difficult to disentangle. The authors encourage thinking less about one-way causal relationships and more about the inter-relatedness among the three concepts.

There appears to be a lot of compatibility between Student Voice and Visible Learning. The *Visible Learning School Matrix – Stage One* provides a comprehensive checklist of the requirements for learning, including sections on school climate and strategic planning. The need for students to have a voice and believe they are listened to is a part of this matrix. However Student Voice has the potential to take a more proactive role in further developing student agency in their learning, by acknowledging the power relationships between students and teachers and consciously shifting this. Bolstad (2011) identifies deeply embedded power differences between students and teachers as a fundamental impediment to implementing Student Voice in school-wide decision making.

An analysis of differential classroom power relationships underpins the work of Russell Bishop, in his analysis of the failure of traditional teaching methods to support indigenous learners (Bishop & Glynn, 2003), and there is much to be learned from Bishop's work in applying Student Voice.

4. How does Student Voice articulate or integrate with other pedagogical processes, in particular teaching as inquiry?

“The fundamental purpose of the Teaching as Inquiry cycle is to achieve improved outcomes for all students. Less obviously, but very importantly, the cycle is an organising framework that teachers can use to help them learn from their practice and build greater knowledge.”³

Teaching as inquiry as described above is conceptually aligned with and integral to Student Voice, which also encourages teachers to develop reflective practice and continuous improvement through evaluating their effectiveness in terms of learning outcomes.

The importance of students exhibiting an active voice in their learning and school environments is not a recent idea. Mager and Nowak (2012) systematically reviewed research on the effects of student participation in decision making at school, which they noted has been a feature of educational debate since Dewey's work in the early part of last century. From the 32 publications that met the inclusion criteria (out of 3102 reviewed), they found moderate evidence of positive effects on life skills, self-esteem, social status, democratic skills and citizenship, student-adult relationships and school ethos.

Improvements in school ethos were found for all types of student participation. There was limited evidence found of positive effects on academic achievement and insufficient evidence found on peer relationships or on effects on teachers. The authors noted that “the lack of evidence in some of the effect categories does not necessarily indicate that these effects of student participation do not exist.” (Mager & Nowak, 2012, p. 50.)

In their research into what makes great teaching (which is defined as teaching that leads to improved student progress), Coe et al (2014) note that supportive professional environments are essential in continually improving teacher effectiveness. Certainly ongoing professional development needs to be continued in relation to the wider uptake of Student Voice activities.

Student Voice processes, systems and practices

Few descriptions were found in this review of processes, systems and practices specific to Student Voice in relation to influencing school-wide decision making. These will need to be developed by participating schools which will have their own ways of putting Student Voice into action, taking into account what is already in place that can be built on.

Some of the material found that could contribute to their development is outlined below.

Core elements of teaching practice in student-centred learning were identified by Cervone & Kushman (2012), who interviewed teachers, students, and administrators and observed them at work—in classrooms, teams, exhibitions, and the community:

³ Retrieved on 19 April 2015 from <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-stories/Case-studies/Teachers-as-learners-Inquiry/Teaching-as-inquiry>

- Strong relationships with students
- Personalization and choice in curricular and instructional tasks
- Appropriate challenge levels for each learner
- Supporting students' social and emotional growth and identity development
- Anytime, anywhere, and real-world learning
- Technology that is integral to teaching and learning
- Clear, timely assessment and support
- Fostering autonomy and lifelong learning.

In their research on wellbeing in Australian schools, Simmons et al., (2014) used mixed methods including an interactive online survey with 3,906 primary students, 5,362 secondary students, and 707 school staff members, who were invited to imagine an ideal school that promoted their wellbeing. They analysed the results by age and this data provides insights into what is important to students in both primary and secondary settings.

In terms of the school environment, the younger cohorts placed more importance on physical aspects such as bright and cheerful classrooms, trees, and good facilities for sport and fun. Good relationships with teachers, principal and friends were also important. In addition to these aspects, older students identified consultation about school matters, more opportunities to have a say, and Involvement in formal and informal decision-making about matters relating to curriculum, culture and governance as important to their wellbeing.

These results suggest that as children become older, the issue of having a voice in decision making becomes more important to them. There may be benefits for the school in encouraging this kind of participation. The authors cite a number of recent studies that “point to explicit benefits for policy and practice when students are actively engaged in education reform.” (Simmons et al., 2014, p. 19).

Monitoring and evaluation

5. What performance indicators, data, and data collection methods have been used to monitor schools progress in implementing Student Voice processes, systems, and practices?

Data has commonly been collected at a school level through some or all of the following: student surveys via questionnaires (including online), classroom observations (by peers, teachers, principals or external evaluators), focus groups, children's drawings, and assessments of gains in student achievement.

For the last 30 years, national data has been collected in the United States through the Quaglia Institute student voice survey (Quaglia Institute, 2014). The six key indicators used for this survey are also able to be used at a school level. They are:

- academic motivation (outcome variable)
- self-worth
- engagement
- purpose
- teacher support
- peer support

6. What outcome indicators, data, and data collection methods have been used to evaluate success in using Student Voice to influence school-wide decision-making to accelerate progress and achievement?

Libbey (2004) used the term *social connectedness* to refer to the study of a student's relationship to school, which might be the key measure of Student Voice success at a school-wide level.

Outcome indicators for the school environment have included (from studies included in this review)

- improvements in student reporting of school connectedness (using a range of measures)
- changes to the school's physical environment , toilet facilities, playground equipment, availability of quality food, changes to school uniform
- changes to school policies, rule or codes of conduct, lesson content teacher strategies, time schedules, other curricular issues
- introduction of new procedures or systems, including buddy systems, more school trips, extended library access, use of computers and courtyards resulting from student feedback.

Outcome indicators for improved school ethos include:

- improved student attitudes to the school, greater student enjoyment at school
- better student attendance, better atmosphere in class, improved discipline, less bullying, less racism
- students report feeling listened to.

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