About Student Voice and Participation

*If you got your say, then you'd feel like they're letting you in,
and you feel like you're meant to be here.*

Cited by Kids Matter

*Voice comes from a deeper place than our throats.
Voice comes from our hearts, from our minds,
and from the deepest places of knowing.*

Penny Oldfather

Discussions about youth voice are increasing and often are controversial. Beyond the interest in youth voice is a concern for youth participation. This encompasses a focus on civic engagement, youth rights, and intergenerational equity. As defined in a sociological and psychological context, *intergenerational equity* embodies fairness or justice in relationships between children, youth, adults and seniors, particularly in terms of treatment and interactions.

One arena of discussion focuses on *student* voice and participation. Advocacy ranges from appreciation of the importance of understanding the perspectives of youth, to calls for promoting youth development and empowerment, and on to the proposition that youth participation benefits families, adults, organizations, planners, policy makers, communities, and society in general.

Some advocates organize students into a social movement and push for establishing a Student Bill of Rights that guarantee a vote on all schooling matters that affect them (https://www.sturights.org/; https://www.stuvoice.org/).

Opponents argue that student voices lack a mature perspective and often are unrepresentative. They also worry that youth voice and participation can overly empower students and undermine the experienced and expert decisions of school professionals and policy makers. Some are agreeable to student input and are only opposed to students having a major role in decision making. Others caution that eliciting student views and recommendations gives them hope that schools will respond with positive actions, and when this doesn't happen, negative reactions are likely.

Despite the opposition, most educators understand that students have an important perspective on and insights into learning, teaching, and schooling. And many believe that student viewpoints warrant attention and discussion by decision makers.

What is Student Voice?

Definitions of student voice abound. In essence, the focus is on individual and collective statements and actions about education and schooling in general and about current schooling practices in which they are involved in particular.
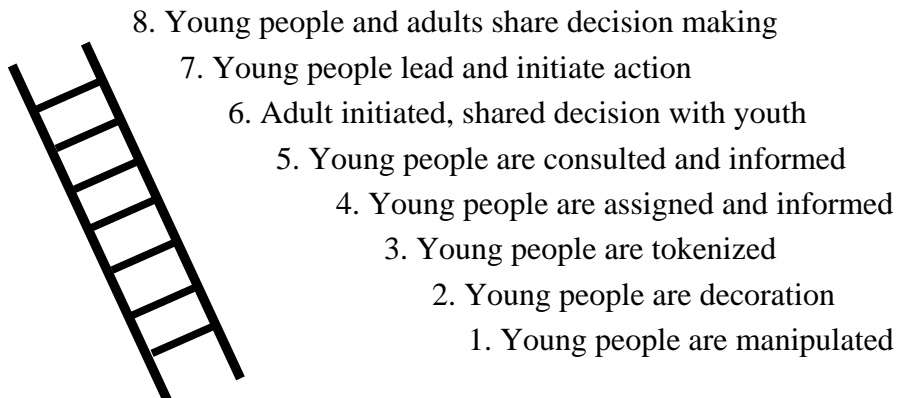
Some definitions include roles and functions for student voice. Examples are (a) student participation in governance decision making related to policies and planning and (b) involvement in arriving at decisions during planning and implementation of instruction and special assistance.

Student voices generate a variety of views and perspectives. They reflect individual and group differences (e.g., in background, social and economic status, development, motivation, ability to communicate). Participation may take the form of (1) students joining established "adult" discussion, planning, and decision making tables, (2) students establishing and operating their own organizations, or (3) creating a new organization where students and adults collaborate as equals.

As illustrated below, Hart conceptualizes types of participation as a ladder with the bottom three rungs (1-3) described as not true participation.

8. Young people and adults share decision making

7. Young people lead and initiate action

6. Adult initiated, shared decision with youth

5. Young people are consulted and informed

4. Young people are assigned and informed

3. Young people are tokenized

2. Young people are decoration

1. Young people are manipulated

It should be noted that there is debate over which of the top rungs actually is the most meaningful form of participation. Some argue that young people are most empowered when they are making decisions without adult influence (e.g., although adults may be involved in a supportive role). Others argue that shared decision making is the most beneficial form for both youth and adults as long as there is a generational power balance.

Our view is that listening to student voice and ensuring participation are essential for school success. And the benefits for everyone increase when student perspectives are validated and accounted for.

> *When, as teachers, we reach that place where we no longer understand the struggling student, when we hear ourselves saying, I've tried everything-or worse- Nothing is working, it is then that we need to take a step back and listen.* (Kroeger and colleagues)

Potential Benefits

Among the potential benefits of student voice and participation are improved school policies and practices and better outcomes. These benefits are reflected, for example, in greater student engagement and expression, personalization of instruction, improved learning and behavior, better school climate, and enhanced social capital.

Student voice is particularly important in understanding barriers to learning and teaching. Students have thoughts and feelings about what's affecting their learning and behavior and what needs to happen to make things better. Empathically hearing what a student has to say is a good starting point. We find it an essential facet of building a sense of trust and (re)engaging students. For example, when teachers are receptive to expressed thoughts and feelings, students are more likely to open-up about problems and needs. Furthermore, eliciting a student's perceptions and participation are especially critical to effective problem-solving. And all this helps students establish the type of collaborative relationship with a teacher or other adult at school that can be a significant protective buffer.

> *You establish a connection, and you say, "We are interested in you as a person - not just your academic side, but as a whole person." Then there is more of a reason to share the story. You show up because someone has taken an interest in your life, not just your homework.*
> (Quoted by Kroeger and colleagues)

For schools, one aspect of the discussion about youth voice and participation involves how best to account for a student's perspective in providing differentiated instruction and addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Differentiated instruction involves the unending quest for improving how we meet learners where they are. The aim is to create a good "match" or "fit" with the learner and, in the process, enhance equity of opportunity for success at school for all students. Personalized instruction is one facet of addressing the context and conditions that must be improved to address factors interfering with student learning and performance. Another facet is ensuring special assistance for students as needed.

Both facets require accounting for individual differences not only in capabilities but also in motivation. Furthermore, from a psychological perspective, we stress that it is the learner's perception that determines whether the fit is good or bad. Given this, personalizing learning means ensuring learning opportunities are perceived by learners as good ways to reach their goals. And the only way to really get any fix on the learner's perceptions is through the student's voice with respect what is needed to make instruction a good fit with their interests, needs, and capabilities. This is especially critical in re-engaging disconnected students.

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A Few Related Research Findings

Contributions to school improvement. Much of the research focuses on the concept of student voice and its role in school improvement. The work of Mitra and colleagues stresses that student voice "addresses a core issue that has been missing in the discussion of school reform-the dilemma of ownership. Simply put, student voice initiatives push schools to reevaluate who gets to define the problems of a school and who gets to try to improve them." Information from students is reported as allowing for more effective, student-oriented school policies and programs. In particular, student voice is seen as enlightening school administrators to the problems that students experience and what to do to address them.

Psychological impact on students. Mitra also reports findings indicating that students who aired their voice and participated in school decision-making felt such opportunities were meaningful and enhanced feelings of agency, belonging, and competence. This was especially true for students who reported that they previously had not found much meaning related to their school experiences. Oldfather and colleagues reported that "honored" voice actually enhanced students' motivation to learn. Students who feel their voices are heard indicated feeling more validated, confident, and less distracted at school.

Positive relationships with adults and peers. Researchers suggest that student voice and participation provide a bridge to enhancing interpersonal relationships at school and improving school climate. For example, Zimrin's work suggests that teachers can enhance their relationship with students by validating students' thoughts and feelings through active listening and providing helpful assistance. Findings indicate that a good relationship with even just one adult at school can increase a student's confidence and be a protective buffer against problems.

Morgan and Streb report that when high school students were given the opportunity to participate in planning a service-learning project, their self-concept, political engagement, and tolerance to out-groups increased. These investigators suggest that, by having a say in a large and significant project at school, students were able to see that they could achieve successful, tangible outcomes that promoted a better world. The improved self-concepts and feelings of accomplishment as part of "authentic interactions on a project about which they care" are seen as explaining the increased political engagement and tolerance toward out-groups.

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Enabling Student Voice and Participation

Some students are more than ready to say what's on their minds. Others are reluctant and even afraid to speak out in the school environment. There are students who may not be aware that they even have a voice, and oftentimes, these are students who are experiencing problems and/or who do not know how to make their voices heard. School staff must continuously focus on enabling student voice and participation.

Some Steps and Principles

Various resources suggest principles and steps for encouraging and facilitating student voice and participation. The following list is a synthesis (see reference and resource list for sources).

1. Provide and expand youth opportunities to become long-term contributors to school and community development. Establish and institutionalize as many ways as feasible to involve youth and enable them to participate in decision-making, planning, problem solving, evaluation, and in taking action. Special attention must be paid to the special needs of youth with respect to scheduling, transportation, access to computers, etc.

2. Be inclusive – reach out to all youth. Being inclusive means recognizing diversity and differences (e.g., in socio-economic status, age, ability, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, life style, etc.). Particular emphasis should be placed on engaging those who have been under-represented such as the many disconnected youth and those who often are experienced as disabled, disturbed, or delinquent. Participation enables those who are viewed as problems to become problem-solvers.

3. *Develop the capacity of youth to participate and lead effectively and the capacity of adults to work with them in supportive ways.* Capacity building must focus on developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for working together productively (e.g., development of communication skills, teamwork, collaboration, and conflict and stress management). Adults should consistently convey that they value and need youth involvement. Mentoring should be mutual – respecting the reality that adults and youth have much to learn from each other. Properly designed, such capacity building encourages and facilitates pursuit of opportunities for personal self-growth, skill enhancement, and leadership for all participants.

4. Engage youth actively in providing new ideas that stimulate enthusiasm and investment in strengthening communities, families, schools, and young people. This requires actively facilitating youth input and ensuring that young people's ideas are recognized as of value (e.g., honored). All ideas must be heard with respect. Youth bring to the table a fresh perspective for identifying issues and possible solutions.

5. Design the working environment to ensure equity and safety for young participants; pay special attention to the distribution of power between young people and adults. Establish member and leadership positions of authority, responsibility, and accountability for young people, and design discussions in ways that facilitate and maintain motivated participation and that ensure voting rights in decision making on all issues and solutions. If there are paid staff positions, some should be offered to young people as a way of ensuring a youth perspective is available on a daily basis.

6. Through collaborative mechanisms integrate and weave together the resources of schools, homes, and communities to support meaningful youth participation and a wide-range of networking for accomplishing the group's mission. Resources should be budgeted to underwrite the costs of effective youth participation and networking.

7. Link youth to comprehensive planning and policy efforts. This includes participation in bodies that analyze existing policies and propose new ones. Ensure they have ample opportunity to identify their own interests within the context of community and societal policy making and program development. Involve them in confronting serious social problems and conditions that will allow them to see themselves as agents for the positive transformation of their environments. Such participation can be a major step toward long-term participation and contributing to community programs/policy.

8. Self reflect, evaluate, and celebrate the group's accomplishments in ways that recognize differences in perspective and contribution. A key factor in capacity building for participating and leading is the ability to learn from experiences. This is facilitated by structured reflection and debriefing and by formative evaluation. It is important to use the opportunity also to let everyone, and especially youth know, that their involvement is valued and to inform the community and public at large about progress and encourage formal recognition and official thanks.

Some Mechanisms

Teachers and other school staff can reach out to elicit a student's thoughts and feelings about school, home life, and life in general. Teachers can expand ways that they promote student self-expression through each day's regular lessons. The following activities can help.

Self-expression activities. Providing time, guidance, and support so that students can express their thoughts and opinions via

>Written journal entries

>Group discussion

>Artistic products (e.g., drawing, making a short video).

One-on-one time with teachers. Teachers can arrange individual formal and informal dialogues with a student (e.g., a personal conference, a random chat). These provide opportunities for authentic and caring interchanges and empathic listening.

Interviews and surveys. Another formal approach is through interviews, surveys, focus groups, shadowing, or taped dialogues. These are common mechanisms used by those mainly seeking input related to school improvement.

Special collaborative roles for students. Some of the literature focuses on choosing students to participate in special collaborative roles (e.g., on committees). Opening up such opportunities encourages student voice and participation. (See example in the following Exhibit.)
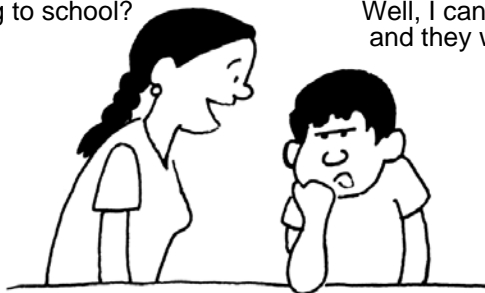
Student Voice at School Planning and Decision-Making Tables

Promoting student voice and participation in education requires organizational adjustments. Here are the types of questions that require answers in bringing youth to the table:

- What will be their responsibilities (roles, functions) and accountabilities? (In what ways will the responsibilities and accountabilities be the same and in what ways will they differ from the adults at the table?)
- Who should be recruited and how?
- How will they effectively be inducted into the operational infrastructure and prepared for their roles and functions?
- How will they be reimbursed for time, effort, and costs?
- How will meetings and workgroups be arranged to accommodate their school and work schedules?
- How will the group provide for continuously developing the capacity of youth (and all others) and support everyone's efforts in ways that enhance motivation for working together productively?
- Are there plans for regular debriefings and evaluations?

(From *Youth Participation: Making It Real* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youthpartic.pdf .)

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The following is a sample of a checklist developed by the Association of Alaska School Boards. to help boards determine their capability for having effective youth representation.*

- Does the board have the time and resources to make a commitment to effective youth representation?
- Have you amended the by-laws or created policies stating that young people will be a permanent part of governing your organization?
- Is your board clear about why you are involving young people in governance?
- Is the board willing to adjust their culture to make things youth-friendly?
- Have you outlined recruitment criteria for new members? (e.g. motivation, diversity, competence, quality of past experiences, etc.)
- Is there a mentor or coaching system in place?
- Do you have a system in place for youth members to train new youth members?
- Are young people's terms of office equal to those of adults?
- Do young people have equal voting status and/or does your representative substantially influence governance of the organization?

*To guide the process, they wrote a booklet about how to efficiently do this. See *The Power of An Untapped Resource: Exploring Youth Representation on Your Board or Committee* http://labor.alaska.gov/awib/Untapped_Resource.pdf .

Concluding Comment

Ongoing, whole-school efforts are required to ensure that all students feel included, heard, and can participate in ways that influence school life. The aim is to build a school culture in which student voice is seen as essential. Such a culture is a critical part of facilitating school improvement that enhances student academic outcomes and general well-being, establishes relationships that can serve as protective buffers, builds a sense of community, and betters school climate.

If the Every Student Succeed Act is to be more than a polemical phrase, student voices must be listened to and classrooms must be redesigned to enable teachers to personalize and blend instruction for all students, provide a greater range of accommodations and enrichment options, and add special assistance in the context of implementing "Response to Intervention."

Through hearing authentic student self-expression, schools are in a position to validate and act on appropriate student perceptions. Understanding student thoughts and feelings is key to making learning personal and empowering and generally improving schools in ways that enhance equity of opportunity.

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Also see the Summer 2009 issue of *Focal Point* on "Youth Empowerment and Participation in Mental Health Care" from Portland's Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health http://www.rtc.pdx.edu

>A Few Websites

>>The FreeChild Project – http://www.freechild.org/index.htm

>>SoundOut: Student Voice in Schools – http://www.soundout.org/

>>Youth on Board – http://www.youthonboard.org/

>>UNICEF'S Child and youth participation resource guide – http://www.unicef.org/adolescence/cypguide/resourceguide_protection.htm

>>National Youth Rights Association – http://www.youthrights.org/

>>AED Center for Youth Development and Policy Research – http://cydpr.aed.org/

>>Arsalyn (a non-partisan program of Ludwick Family Foundation, promotes youth civic and political engagement) – http://www.arsalyn.org/

>>America's Promise – http://www.americaspromise.org/

>>Innovation Center for Community Youth Involvement – http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/

>>The McCreary Centre Society's Youth Action – http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ya_ladd.htm

>>Youth-led Organizations in Wikipedia – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Youth-led_organizations

>>Student Voice – https://www.stuvoice.org/