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Australian Educational Leader Vol 40, Term 1 2018



‘As system leaders if we can’t see how our work impacts delivery then we shouldn’t be doing it..’

Gill Callister  
in our spotlight interview

## Leading Sustainable Change

Leading change in your School: A sustainable process

by Professor Barbara R. Blackburn  
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Student voice: A way of being

by Dr Russell J. Quaglia  
Dr Kristine M. Fox



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# Student voice: A way of being

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Meaningful, informative articles about student voice were scarce just decades ago, and there was simply no chance of finding peer reviewed research, university courses, conferences, or books dedicated to the topic. Today, there are daily tweets, webinars, blogs, and research articles related to student voice and student agency. International organisations and leading educational researchers extol the necessity of student voice in learning and life. Student voice is finally a priority in educational reform efforts. This long-overdue attention is both needed and deserved. One of the most influential and applied documents related to youth voice is Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC):

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

This document is a driving force for student voice initiatives in countries around the world. Providing opportunities for young people to be heard, to develop their voices and participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives must be a priority in schools. Educators now recognise that student voice can no longer be a novelty or merely a 20-minute add-on activity once the academic work is done. Nor can voice be restricted to leadership clubs or reserved for the most talented students. Voice must be a way of being for *all* students, of all ages and all abilities.

## The progression of student voice

Student voice, also referred to as student agency, has a long history in educational theory. John Dewey (1916) wrote extensively about the need for students to be active participants in their learning. Freire (1970) viewed voice as a path towards freedom and liberation. Student agency incorporates students being actively involved in choices and decisions related to their educational experiences. Agency allows students to take an active role in shaping their own futures, rather than being solely influenced by their circumstances (Bandura 2006; Green et al. 2012; Wigfield et al. 2015). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), compared 15-year-old students in 65 cities across the world and found that the most successful students are those who have a sense of ownership of their education (OECD 2017). While educational theory on student voice has progressed over the last century, the most current research provides measurable data that shows the positive impact student voice has on a multitude of educational outcomes. Research shows

that student voice is more than making students feel important and valued; it is an approach to school improvement that makes the learning environment engaging, relevant, meaningful and more productive.

Student voice impacts areas of personal development, including better decision making, increased preparation to participate in society, and an enhanced understanding of responsibility, all of which are laudable educational goals. A recent Harvard study, sponsored by the Raikes Foundation, suggests that student agency (student voice) may be as critical to outcomes of schooling as basic academic skills (Ferguson et al. 2015). John Hattie (2012) highlights the importance of student control over learning has a high effect size. Other studies show the connection between student voice and engagement (Fisher et al. 2018; Mitra 2008; Rudduck 2007). Students who affirm they have a voice in school are seven times more likely to be motivated to learn (Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations 2016). The impact of voice also extends beyond individual students and classrooms. Effective implementation of school-wide change requires participation by, and buy-in from, students (Fullan & Stiegelbauer 1991; Levin 2000). When students believe they are being heard and influencing decisions, schools become more relevant to their lives and are more likely to be seen as serving their needs (Quaglia & Corso 2014).

The progress of the student voice movement is exciting. The caution is to make sure the movement does not become an educational trend. Trends come and go, yet student voice must always be at the centre of meaningful learning. Educators must commit to ensuring that voice becomes a natural occurrence, an integral part of education, for all students, every year. To start, educators need to distinguish between voice and noise.

## Transforming noise to voice

Student voice can sometimes be misinterpreted as student noise. Students may be sharing their thoughts and ideas, but all too often it can be heard in the form of demands, commands, complaints, and blame. Teachers hear the students, but soon realise that the students have no investment in becoming part of the solution – only in complaining and placing blame. Noise often results in more chaos than progress, ultimately undermining a collaborative learning environment and wasting time and energy. Student voice, on the other hand, involves *sharing thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and opinions in*



a safe environment built on trust and respect. Voice is presented in the form of ideas, suggestions, and a sense of shared responsibility. It includes students contributing realistic solutions for the good of the whole. Voice thrives in an environment where students demonstrate a willingness to learn from one another. Perhaps most importantly, student voice includes students being responsible for both what they say and what they do. This responsibility encompasses taking action to make a difference beyond oneself.

When student voice is truly present, students are engaged and:

- ask questions to strengthen their understanding
- offer suggestions to help develop action plans
- believe that ideas are stronger in partnership
- listen to and learn from peers and adults
- reflect, take action, and accept the responsibility that comes with being part of the solution.

Clearly, student voice in schools is more productive than noise, but student noise should not be disregarded. Noise can be untapped voice with a great deal of potential. The key is to not mute student noise, but to transform it into meaningful student voice. Such a transformation can be challenging in an environment where data shows (QISVA 2016) that only:

- 44% of students feel they have a voice in school decision making
- 47% believe teachers are willing to learn from students
- 43% agree that students develop programs to improve the whole school
- 50% believe that adults and students work together to make school better.

While disheartening, this student voice data is a starting point, not the finish line. It may be challenging, but embracing student voice is more than possible – it is essential. Student voice must be present if educators are to provide the optimal learning environment for their students. History reflects it, research proves it, and yet, after over a century of conversation later, one question still lingers: *Why is meaningful student voice so elusive in schools?*

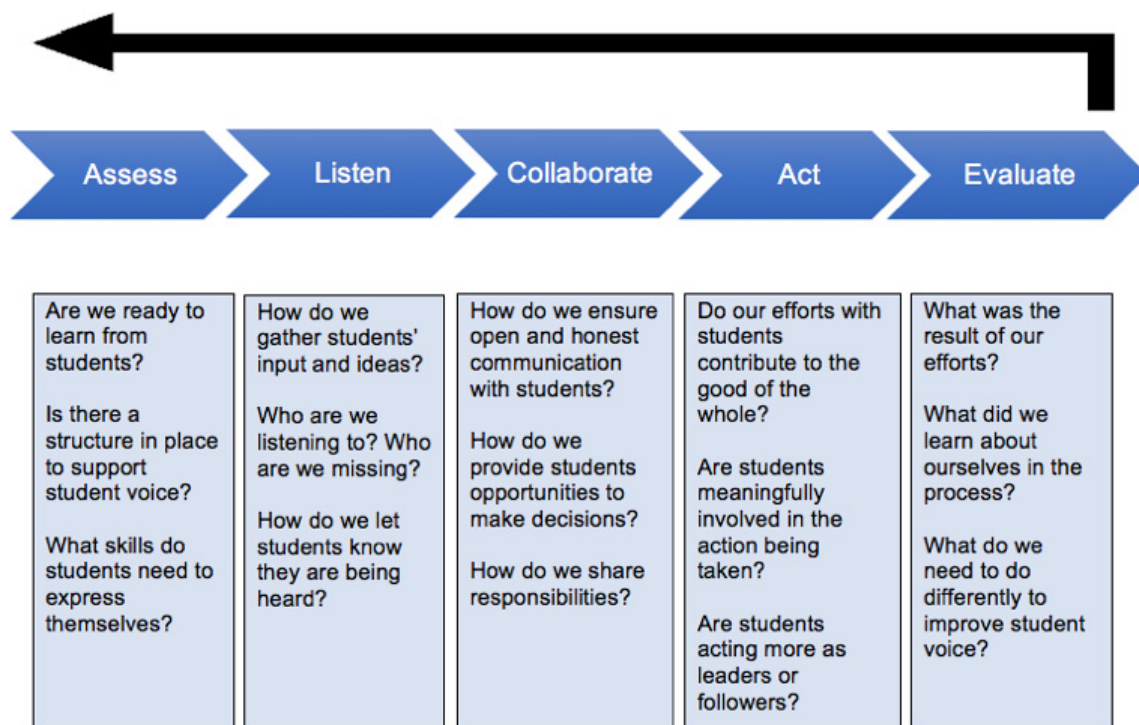
### Ready and willing

Our experience shows that all too often students and teachers are not ready and/or willing to engage their voices. Students do not have the skills and understanding of how to use their voices in meaningful ways, and teachers are not truly willing to listen to *and learn from* students. For student voice to become systemic and impactful, to become a natural way of being in schools, there must be an effort to ensure that all students, staff - the entire organisation - are ready and willing for the voices of students to be heard and valued.

We define readiness as having the skills, abilities, and knowledge to integrate student voice. All teachers and students need to be able to formulate, articulate, and share their ideas with one another. Similarly, the organisation has to provide an underlying structure that incorporates diverse ideas in school improvement efforts. Lacking these skills, people become frustrated and begin to doubt the effectiveness and potential of student voice. When all stakeholders display readiness, the following is evident on a regular basis:

- clear and honest communication
- ability to learn from mistakes and make adjustments
- mutual respect and collaboration
- opportunities for students to make meaningful decisions.





Questions educators need to reflect upon during the student voice process

We define willingness as an overall enthusiasm to offer ideas and be actively involved in the process. Willingness involves intentionality and collaboration - a conscious commitment to make a difference for the greater good. A teacher who is well-versed in student voice is not enough. There must be a desire for student-driven change. When all stakeholders display a willingness, student voice drives all initiatives. Questions such as ‘What are our students’ perspectives?’ ‘What ideas do our students have?’ ‘How will students be part of our change efforts?’ are everyday conversations. When there is a willingness, students are involved in all aspects of school life, and not having a student on a committee will seem strange. When all stakeholders display willingness, the following is evident on a regular basis:

- commitment to be involved
- volunteering to take action
- respect for varying points of view
- trust
- belief that students have something to teach adults.

The above process reflects the dynamic nature of how being ready and willing allows student voice to become a natural way of being. Student voice is a process, not an event. It begins with assessing the current status of student voice in your school, listening and collaborating to take action, and evaluating the outcomes.

As the school community becomes more adept with this process, the sophistication of student voice will advance. However, it is important to continue to reflect and apply this process. Schools should forever *listen*, *collaborate*, and *act* with students.

**Learning through reflection**

Throughout your school’s unique student voice journey, it is important to continually discuss the following questions related to student voice. Engage colleagues, students, and administrators in these discussions to guarantee that all perspectives are considered.

**1. How well does the entire school community understand the potential of voice?**

Take the time to learn, alongside each other, about the magnitude of voice. Voice, after all, is the basis and purpose of any democracy. Historical and current events are riddled with examples of the powerful impact of student voice. Whether students are college or career bound, low-income, LGBT, English language learners, or struggling learners, there are countless, relatable examples of the powerful impact youth voices have on our changing society. The voices of young people have ignited political movements on Twitter, demanded equality in schools, publicised the realities and plights of immigrants, and empowered students at the Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC). As you work through challenges and obstacles incorporating student voice in your school, keep in mind that every experience with voice will help students be better equipped to use their voice in life.

**Voice in Action**

At Mount Waverley Secondary College, in Melbourne, Australia, students enthusiastically implemented a Teach the Teacher program, which they had learned about at VicSRC. This program provides students and teachers opportunities to discuss their school’s teaching and learning environment. It establishes a framework for students to investigate current educational research, conduct their own research, and use their findings to collaborate with their peers to develop professional learning programs for staff.

**2. How do students consistently practise voice?**

To support and develop voice, youth must have consistent opportunities to practise using their voice. We do not expect



students to suddenly read without instruction, modelling, and practice. Likewise, we cannot expect students to hone their voices without the same. Voice cannot be reserved for the 'extra' spaces in a school day. All students need consistent opportunities to experience using their voices and develop a sense of ownership for what and how they learn. Some students may need more practise formulating and articulating their opinions than others, but *all* students deserve consistent opportunities to practise and realise the potential of their voice.

**Voice in Action**

Oak Hill Academy is an Aspirations Academy school in London, England. The elementary school puts student voice front and centre. When visitors enter the school, they are greeted by a Student Ambassador who is prepared to provide any information visitors need to know.

**3. How does the school community engage everyone's voice?**

It is easy to involve students who have lots of ideas, are articulate, and love school. While the voice of this type of youth is necessary, educators must actively seek out the voices of everyone. We must continually ask ourselves: 'Who are we missing?' 'Why?' 'What are we (or they) afraid of?' We must intentionally create platforms and opportunities for the shy, insecure, non-native speaking, and challenging students. All students need to know that their voices matter even if, or especially because, their ideas and opinions are different. From a young age, from the very first day of school, students should unequivocally know that, 'My voice is my choice. It is special to me' (Quaglia & Quaglia 2017).

**Voice in Action**

At Woodside High School in Woodside, CA, USA, student voice is such a natural way of being that it is called the 'Woodside Way'. Each year, students are tasked with analysing student data and developing solutions to improve their school. The students work collaboratively with teachers to implement their ideas.

**4. How well does everyone understand the responsibility of voice?**

As the potential and pitfalls of voice escalate in an age of social media, students must realise that voice demands responsibility.

The impact of student voice can be commendable or destructive. A single tweet or hashtag can start a powerful movement, for example #MeToo. One ridiculing post on Instagram can devastate a peer. Responsibility also accompanies a student's choice *not* to participate. For example, not voting can result in a candidate you disagree with being elected. Not sharing your concerns over a new school policy can result in implementations that negatively affect you and your peers. Educators must support students in their journey to express themselves, and simultaneously help them navigate the use of their voices with a sense of respect and responsibility.

**Voice in Action**

At the Universal American School in Dubai, UAE, student voice is an integral part of the instructional coaching model for teachers. Students are as responsible for the quality of teaching and learning environment as the teachers. These efforts lead to students being meaningfully engaged in their classes.

**5. How does your school measure student voice success?**

Setting goals is not a new concept in education. Goals help define where we are going and enable us to measure success. It is no different with student voice, and voice goals should be established in conjunction with academic goals. Just as each school has its own vision statement, each school has a unique student voice journey. Success is therefore uniquely defined. For schools that are just starting their journeys, collaborating with students is success. For schools entrenched in their voice efforts, students making meaningful decisions as members of search committees is success. No matter your school's starting point, student voice success can be measured based on progress toward achieving your goals. The critical component to continued success is being ready and willing to continuously reassess and reevaluate along the journey.

No longer is the choice about whether students share their voices or not. The era we live in decided students do. Students share. Students get involved. Students are shaping their own futures. It is, however, our choice, and indeed our responsibility, to more fully embrace and support the power and potential of student voice in our schools. As you move forward considering the importance of student voice and how it can be operationalised and maximised in your school, *we challenge you to never forget that students have something to teach you.*



## Lead Article

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