Student Voice

Voice - the critical component of school improvement

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While there may be some commonality in the purpose of school improvement and the need for everyone working together to change practices for better student outcomes (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2021), education systems around the world continue to struggle to achieve high standards and sustainable improvement, equity, and wellbeing for all they serve (Fullan & Gallagher, 2020). Supporting all students to see themselves as unique human beings who are confident, creative, self-motivated, and successful lifelong learners eager to contribute to the world around them are usually core goals of educational systems (Education Council, 2019). But how do educators know what knowledge, skills, capabilities, dispositions, and ideas each student possesses if they do not hear from the students themselves on a regular basis? To support our young in achieving equitable and aspirational goals, we must first listen to the voices of all individuals and understand their hopes, dreams, and aspirations (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). If success lies in the collective beliefs and actions of students, teachers and leaders collaborating to achieve great things (Donohoo et al., 2018), then we need everyone's voice to be included in developing, enacting, and evaluating the day-to-day expectations and actions of the school community.

Understanding voice

Voice is a way of expressing who we are as unique human beings, an expression of our knowledge, ideas, beliefs, and dreams. A definition of voice has been crafted as a result of many decades of work with educators and students by Quaglia, Fox, Lande and Young (2020). Their definition and work continue to inform improvement and transform schools through embracing student voice in all aspects of school. They offer a definition of voice that comprises three key components that can unleash the strengths and capabilities of every individual. Voice is:

- Sharing thoughts and ideas in an environment underpinned by trust and respect.
- Offering realistic suggestions for the good of the whole.
- Accepting responsibility for not only what is said but also what needs to be done.

(Quaglia et al., 2020)

Although the term "student voice" has evolved over time, including such terms as student rights, student participation, student agency and student action teams (Vukovic, 2020), the Quaglia et al. (2020) definition of voice is more applicable in schools, as it incorporates a mutually beneficial concept for both adults and students. This definition is inclusive of all voices and encourages everyone to contribute to the good of the whole. It is about who we are together, not just the actions of students. Everyone benefits when all voices are shared, building greater understanding, and meaning through continual dialogue and discussion. It is about building trust and respectful relationships which are essential for the positive wellbeing of students (Powell et al, 2018). It is about building individual and collective capacity to learn, taking action, and being responsible *together*. Students' potential to contribute to their school's goals and aspirations will only be fully realised when, alongside teachers and leaders, they authentically have a voice in decisions that impact them.

A shared definition and understanding of the components and significance of voice will allow schools to implement and maximise the impact of the combined thoughts, ideas, suggestions, and actions. Deliberately seeking the collective voices of all in the school community creates genuine collaboration, inclusive of diverse ideas and thoughts. Students, teachers, support staff and parents all have opportunity to contribute to understanding, interpreting, and

deciding on shared actions and expectations. There is an assumption that adults already have effective voices in school improvement efforts, yet school voice data reveals a different story (Quaglia et al, 2020). This may be a result of lack of shared understanding of what we mean by "voice". The third component of the voice definition referred to earlier leads to an expectation of responsibility and action. When voice is deliberately activated across all areas of the school, it encourages ideas, builds confidence, and celebrates collective actions that produce desired outcomes. When voice is embedded in all aspects of school, everyone learns that they are expected to contribute in different, but equally valued, respected, and responsible ways. Unleashing the power of voice by incorporating it as a genuine way of being is the how in schools; it is a way to achieve contextual goals and aspirations while empowering all to see themselves as confident, creative, and contributing members of the community. Unleashing potential is the why (Quaglia et al., 2020)

Unleashing potential

Having a voice is not about privilege or holding a position of power to persuade others to listen. Having a voice and freedom of expression, is a basic human right, as is the development of a unique personality (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). Developing your unique voice, expressing your thoughts and ideas as you develop your sense of identity and personality, is more than having a say; it is an expression of your experiences, thoughts, and construction of meaning (Quaglia et al., 2020). It is about your perception of your worth and capability, as well as an expression of your expectation that you will be heard, respected, and valued. Having a voice and sharing your thoughts and ideas is one way to exercise a sense of control over situations and events that impact us and affect our daily lives. It is not just an expression of our intentions; rather, it is being encouraged and empowered to act in alignment with that expression, to build confidence and a sense of purpose. People differ in how they build their beliefs, sense of wellbeing, and judgement of their capabilities, referred to as their sense of "self-efficacy", in a given situation (Bandura, 2006). If we want equity in education, we must acknowledge that perceived self-efficacy can impact the intention to succeed as well as the belief that you can succeed in each situation (Bandura, 2006). This aligns words with actions and moves ideas into reality.

Creating opportunities for all students to achieve success requires supporting everyone to put in the required effort, collaboratively and collectively, to create this success. This means we must develop each individual's belief or perception that they are capable of producing future success. Opportunities to exercise some sense of control must exist for students in multiple situations. Leadership and responsibility cannot be reserved for a few students but must be provided for all students so they can move beyond their comfort zones and build confidence to take action and make a difference. This can be achieved when there is a shared understanding of what it means to have a voice, students have opportunities to use their voices, and students are encouraged to reach their potential and achieve their ambitions. A confident voice develops when you know unequivocally that you are valued as a unique and respected individual. With this as a foundation, students are equipped to recognise and achieve their potential.

Achieving excellence and equity through voice

For all our young to achieve equitable and aspirational goals, we must clearly define what we mean by success beyond a narrow set of quantitative measurements, and look deeper at the purpose of schooling. What is excellence in education and how can this be

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measured? If education is a process, then we continue to be educated throughout life, not just at school. Perhaps excellence in education can be seen as developing the willingness and enjoyment of continual learning that supports the achievement of personal and collective goals and aspirations. This must include encouraging individuals to become the drivers of their own destiny, to recognise who they are meant to be, and to learn how to be the best version of themselves. In the process, the voices of those who are already confident and see themselves achieving their goals must not drown out the voices of those in a more tenuous stage of developing their voices.

Giving students agency over their learning is not enough. No one should have to wait to be given permission to express themselves and take responsibility for their own decisions and actions. Current calls for more student agency in schools presume that there is a shared understanding of what this means, and yet there is no global agreement on what student agency means (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). This lack of clarity can lead to assumptions and an inadequate understanding about how to best support students' abilities to appropriately respond to life's challenges. A shared definition of voice applied across a school community, where voice incorporates a sense of agency and autonomy, can enhance wellbeing.

This intentional inclusion of voice within daily teaching and learning, especially for those who lack confidence, dreams, goals, and a clear sense of purpose, deserves the same level of commitment devoted to teaching any foundational knowledge or skills. Supporting students to co-construct success criteria with the teacher can encourage the use of student voice. Student self-assessment included in their reports encourages reflection and responsibility for their own learning, especially if paired with student led conferencing to develop their next learning goals. Teachers could highlight personal and social capabilities such as appreciating diverse perspectives or recognising emotions (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2021) which sit alongside academic learning intentions so students' academic skills are attained *through* using their voice, listening and learning with others. Australia's educational goals inherently call for this. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration includes the goal of developing confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community (Education Council, 2019). We cannot unleash the uniqueness, abilities, complexities, and potential of each individual until we incorporate voice and co-create the way forward. We need to shift from a culture of individuals all trying to be the best and create a collaborative culture that brings out the best in each other. We need to build capacity, learn by co-designing and implementing strategies collectively (Elliott & Hollingsworth, 2020), and weave voice throughout all aspects of planning, implementing, and enacting our shared vision and actions in schools.

Creating conditions for success

Implementing ideas and plans into a practical way of being requires explicit planning, a shared language, and a common understanding about what is important and valued as a community. Success is reached through multiple pathways and the attainment of incremental goals unique to each context. There is no single way to achieve aspirations, no defined script to follow, or solitary skill to develop. There are only supporting conditions that build human capacity for ongoing learning and adapting. Collaboration, shared understanding, and communication are vital tools for the journey. If students actively use their voice in practices such as talk partners, questioning, and effective feedback, and this creates improvements in classroom culture and learning outcomes (Clarke, 2021), imagine what student voice can achieve when students are involved in data analysis, interpreting, solving problems and curriculum design and assessment.

Shirley Clarke advocates for the significance of co-creation in developing success criteria (Hattie & Clarke, 2018). Leaders and teachers often discuss the need to create buy-in or shared commitment to a common goal, without recognising that the preconceived goal may not have been co-created in the first place. We cannot ask students for commitment and action towards goals that they do not understand or recognise the relevance of in their own lives. While a common purpose will bring a group of people together, the pathways to achieve that purpose must be multiple and varied. Seeking student ownership, motivation, and engagement within the confines of a pre-determined structure or curriculum, asking students to follow those who are in "control", and granting permission to contribute ideas to predefined definitions of success does not reflect inclusion and acknowledgment; it reflects compliance. When compliance is the driving force, the power remains in the architects' hands, and success is defined by attaining a predetermined picture of quantifiable achievement. Defining success by such a closed set of measures to be attained by a certain time and in a certain way does not value the voices of the individuals on the learning journey.

Integrating student voice from the start by co-creating success criteria in all aspects of school will increase students' understanding and investment in the purpose and the pathways to success.

Co-creation has the potential to be fairer, more sustainable, and increase social connections which may be more socially just and involve a multidirectional approach to problem solving (Leino & Puumala, 2021). As co-creation moves beyond participation, schools must actively encourage students to be a part of the change they wish to see in school processes and practices. How can anyone contribute, thrive, and take responsibility within our dynamic, globally connected world if they are not involved, from the very beginning, in sharing their thoughts and ideas and developing confidence to lead and take action for the good of the whole? Schools can foster these skills, capabilities, and dispositions by teaching and encouraging students to use their voices, take responsibility, lead, and act.

Voice is so much more than sharing ideas and thoughts. It is the essence of who we are as humans in an interconnected world. It is how students express who they are and how they develop their capabilities and capacity to understand their place in this world. It is how students will contribute to the global community and create our future society. It is how students will achieve a sense of wellbeing and accomplishment as they use their voices to interact and become their authentic selves. Without knowing, understanding, and using their own voices, students will be passive recipients without a sense of purpose or understanding of who they are meant to be. With a shared definition and commitment to activating voice as a way of being in schools, we can achieve excellence through equity. It is how we will build the capacity of each individual, value everyone's contributions to the system, and help ensure that every student realises their potential. When students are invited to co-create the way forward, not only do school improvement efforts lead to meaningful change, but students learn how to use their voices to engage and succeed both in school and in life.

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Sue Bryen is the Director of Learning Services - Australia with the Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations. Having worked with hundreds of schools across Australia on implementing school change, Sue now supports school leadership teams in their efforts to better understand and create the conditions that support student voice and collective efficacy. She believes it is through collaboration and co-creation that we can build the capacity of staff and students to listen, learn, and lead together to continually improve student outcomes. As a passionate educator for nearly 30 years, Sue has held a variety of school-based positions, from teacher to principal, before focusing on professional learning and implementation of school improvement interventions. She is widely recognised as an authentic and passionate lead learner who links professional learning research to the pragmatism of schools. Sue is a strong advocate for equity in education and continually seeks to connect with others to be the change they wish to see in the educational environment. Sue has presented both nationally and internationally on the concepts of visible learning, collective efficacy, and student voice and aspirations.