

## Learner Voice Demonstrates Commitment to Building Agency

Barbara Bray & Kathleen McClatskey, October 2015 Blog



Learner voice gives learners a chance to share their opinions about something they believe in. There are so many aspects of "school" and "learning" where learners have not been given the opportunity to be active participants. Some learners, especially those that are concerned about extrinsic factors like grades, may not feel comfortable expressing their own opinions. Giving learners voice encourages them to participate in and eventually to own and drive their learning. This means a complete shift from the traditional approach of teaching compliance that develops a "learned helplessness" to encouraging voice where there is authenticity in the learning.

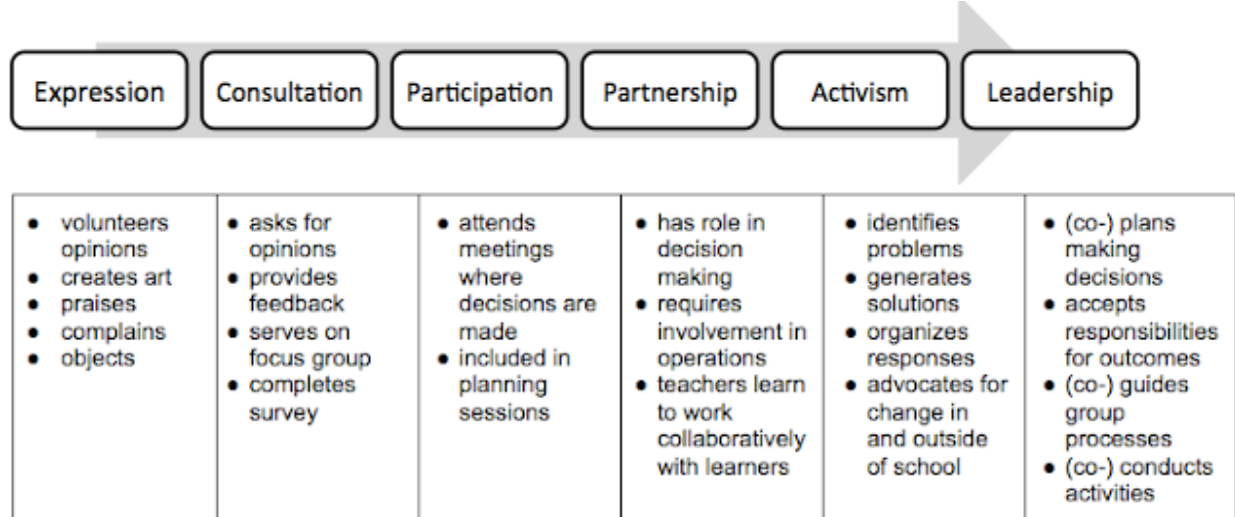
The idea of "school" is supposed to be about building relationships that develop a culture of learning. If you ask learners what they think about school, you open the door to a myriad of discussions about them wanting to be heard, having their teachers care about them, and about teachers really listening to what they are saying. When teachers and learners engage in meaningful conversations based on real-world issues where they have a voice in decision-making, then they are building a collaborative community of learners. Dropout rates, learner achievement, and workforce readiness will improve by integrating learners' voices in the classroom and in society.

"Encouraging voice refers to those pedagogies in which youth have the opportunity to influence decisions that will shape their lives and those of their peers either in or outside of school." (Mitra, 2009)

According to Eric Toshalis and Michael J. Nakkula in their report "Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice," learner voice demonstrates a commitment to the facilitation of agency and to the creation of policies, practices, and programs that revolve around the learners' interests and needs. "In this era of standardization and the Common Core, the practice of elevating student (learner) voice might seem counter cultural but given the importance of agency, autonomy, and self-regulation in learning, it is really rather commonsensical."

*Without motivation, there is no push to learn.*  
*Without engagement, there is no way to learn.*  
*Without voice, there is no authenticity in learning.*  
 Toshalis and Nakkula

Toshalis and Nakkula explained that the spectrum on learner-voice-oriented activities is where learners can start articulating their perspectives as stakeholders in their learning to directing collective activities. They can move from data sources to leaders of change. The goal is for learners to have a voice that moves to partnership, activism, and leadership roles. As one moves from left to right across the spectrum, then roles, responsibilities and decision-making authority grow.



Most learner voice activities in schools reside in expression, consultation, and participation. Moving toward the right side of the spectrum, learners can affect systemic change and are prepared to lead as problem solvers and decision makers to affect change. When learners act in a way to produce meaningful change, agency is the key to learner voice. (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2013)

Just think about a time when you did not have a voice as part of some activity, organization, or in school. How did you feel? When you have a voice and you are heard, you feel valued and respected. We like to feel we belong and that we have something to contribute.

What Kids Can Do (WKCD) is an organization that embraces learner voice as one of their guiding principles to welcome youth as crucial investors in improving their schools and communities which is similar to moving to the right of the spectrum. Kathleen Cushman at WKCD shared that there is a lot to learn about the complexities of learner voice and that meaningful voice must:

- Be inclusive, beginning with the premise that everyone has membership
- Be woven into the daily fabric of school (and reach far beyond after school clubs and "one-off" events)
- Target substantive issues
- Involve asking and listening by all parties
- Lead to constructive action

Teachers can provide a learning environment that encourages learner voice that moves from participation to leadership yet to do this effectively, the right amount of teacher participation is crucial. Too much direction from the teacher and the learner's voice loses its authenticity and the learner has difficulty developing agency. Too little support or direction can impact the effectiveness of voice and the ability to own and drive their learning. Teachers and learners can work together to develop a partnership that supports the learner building confidence, self-awareness, and the ability to self-advocate for agency.

## References

Cushman, K. and Cervone, B. "Student and Youth Voice: Asking, Listening, and Taking Action." What Kids Can Do [http://www.whatkidscando.org/specialcollections/student\\_voice/index.html](http://www.whatkidscando.org/specialcollections/student_voice/index.html)

Mitra, D.L. 2009. "Student Voice and Student Roles in Education Policy Reform." In D. Plank, G. Sykes, & B. Schneider, eds. AERA Handbook on Education Policy Research. London, UK: Routledge

Toshalis, E. and Nakkula, M (2013). Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice. September 13, 2015, <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/topics/motivation-engagement-and-student-voice>.