

Student Voice: A growing movement within education that benefits students and teachers

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Introduction

For decades, special educators have recorded postsecondary education goals identified by students and their families on the Individualized Education Program (IEP). This process of listening to students and supporting their ideas is just one example of the larger concept of student voice.

In an era of increased accountability and measured student outcomes, student voice represents a growing movement in education. Instead of a top down, teacher directed approach to learning, students play an active and equal role in planning, learning, and leading their classroom instruction as well as contributing to the development of school practices and policies. This significant philosophical shift requires all stakeholders to embrace the belief that there is something to learn from every individual regardless of age, culture, socioeconomic status, or other qualifying factors.

Defining Student Voice

In education, the concept of student voice is twofold. It refers to the expression of values, opinions, beliefs, and perspectives of individuals and groups of students in a school and to instructional approaches and techniques that are based on student choices, interests, passions, and ambitions. Listening to and acting on student preferences, interests, and perspectives helps students feel invested in their own learning and can ignite passions that will increase their persistence.

Benefits of Increasing Student Voice

Research indicates that students who believe they have a voice in school are seven times more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not believe they have a voice (Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations, 2016). According to this 239 school,

14 state study, student voice leads to an increased likelihood that students will experience self-worth, engagement, and purpose in school. The more educators can give their students choice, control, challenge, and opportunities for collaboration, the greater their motivation and engagement will be. This can impact a student’s level of effort and persistence, which is one of the most important factors that affect achievement (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Types of Student Voice

The ultimate goal of encouraging student voice is to engage and empower students, both individually and collectively, and to act on their empowerment in the quest for meaningful instructional experiences that will support lifelong learning. Educators can develop different types of student voice in the classroom that will prepare students to exercise their voice effectively into adulthood.

The following table has been adapted from the Glossary of Education Reform (Great Schools Partnership, 2014) about different types of student voice that can be highlighted in the classroom.

Type of Voice	Description	Student Role or Example
Formal	Applies to organizational systems, leadership, and governing processes.	Participate in student councils, write a letter to your legislator, or join an advocacy group.
Informal	Teachers invite student ideas and opinions, without any obligation to act on the student ideas.	Participate in school surveys; share opinions about current events.
Instructional	Applies to class environment, instructional materials, research topics, or assignment criteria.	Choose the format to complete an assignment (i.e. video or essay); lead your IEP meeting; or determine a class project of interest in the community.
Cultural	The perspectives represented through class materials (texts, web-based, speakers) reflect the diversity of the student body and our global society.	Seek out work (presentations, blogs, text, poetry, music, etc.) created by individuals who reflect the student body and community.
Evaluative	Students give feedback that is used to effect changes in future decisions related to school.	Complete perception surveys about the instructional setting and teacher effectiveness to impact school decisions.

Instructional Strategies to Increase Student Voice

Incorporating student voice in the classroom requires deliberate intention and commitment. Through the following strategies, teachers can create learning spaces for students to use, practice, and grow their voice.

Tips	Description
Facilitate student input regularly	<p>Encourage student feedback and ideas. Designate a space in the classroom for students to ask questions, and state ideas, likes, and improvements. Respond to student comments each day or week.</p> <p>Practice yielding to student voice. Brainstorm a list with students of “Things We Want to Know About.” Explore how to blend their interests with educational standards.</p> <p>Use a Power Vote to prioritize action steps or next activities. Brainstorm a list in response to a prompt such as “How to learn about the water cycle,” and have students vote on their top selections.</p>
Teach students to exercise voice through activity based learning	<p>Offer project based learning activities. Identify real world problems of interest to your students. Let students work together to brainstorm strategies and solutions to make a difference.</p> <p>Practice the art of discussion. Use “turn to your neighbor” to discuss individual thoughts about a provided topic, brainstorm solutions to a problem, or talk about individual opinions before discussion with the larger group.</p> <p>Introduce student blogs. Individual student blogs provide a medium for students to express themselves to an invisible audience using writing, pictures, and videos.</p>
Teach skills of self-expression	<p>Assertive communication. Teach how to give feedback using “I” statements, eye contact, and open body language. Role-play passive, aggressive, and assertive communication.</p>
Involve students in IEP development and goal setting	<p>Student led IEPs and goal development. Teach students the skills and knowledge to be involved in the IEP process. Provide opportunities for students to set short and long term goals, including IEP goals, to discuss ways to reach their goals, and to brainstorm choices they may need to make to reach their goals.</p>

(Fletcher, 2015; Marzano Research, 2008; Ratcliffe, 2014; Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations, 2016).

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