



Student Voice

A historical perspective and
new directions

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Foreword

A curriculum which equips students for the challenging world of the twenty-first century needs to ensure that students are supported to take increasing responsibility for their own learning, their physical, personal and social wellbeing, their relationships with others and their role in the local, national and global community.

The notion of ‘student voice’ helps meet the objectives of developing the interdisciplinary skills vital for such a curriculum. It also ensures that the needs of individual students guide the design of personalised learning plans.

The *Victorian Essential Learning Standards* are a framework of *essential learning* based on the premise that there are three components of any curriculum which are necessary to enable students to meet the demands of a modern, globalised world.

One of the three core strands in the Standards is Physical, Personal and Social Learning which includes the learning domains of Interpersonal Development and Personal Learning.

In our highly interconnected and interdependent world, students learn to work with others by: building positive social relationships; working and learning in teams; and managing and resolving conflicts.

As students progress through school they need to be encouraged and supported to take greater responsibility for their own learning and participation at school. This involves developing as individual learners who increasingly manage their own learning and growth, by setting goals and managing resources to achieve these.

I trust that you will find this report a useful resource for generating discussion in your school on innovative ways of capturing the authentic student voice as a means of engaging students, enhancing their educational experiences and improving pedagogical practice.

Dr Dahle Suggett
Deputy Secretary
Office of Learning and Teaching

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Introduction

This report summarises local and international literature on the concept of ‘student voice’ and explores the links between student voice and student learning and engagement. The notion of ‘student voice’ helps meet the objectives of developing the interdisciplinary skills vital for a curriculum which reflects the *Victorian Essential Learning Standards*. It also ensures that the needs of individual students guide the design of personalised learning plans.

Research indicates that changing societal attitudes and views of young people over several decades has led to the development and refinement of the concept of student voice. Part 1 of this paper examines student voice from a historical perspective and summarises the findings of Australian and international research. Part 2 is a review of how Australian jurisdictions are promoting student voice and includes a range of initiatives within the Victorian education system that are contributing to improved teaching and learning, teacher-student relationships and productive learning experiences.

The historical perspective on student voice begins in the 1980s. However, this report concentrates on information from 1990 to 2006. The focus of the literature research was on a number of key areas, including:

- definition and characteristics of student voice
- student voice and student engagement
- student voice and whole school improvement
- local and international case studies incorporating student voice
- considerations for schools.

Currently, the concept of student voice is reflected in recent major international reports, with focused attention being expressed in current OECD reports and in the significant work being undertaken in the United Kingdom.

The challenge is to ally choice with voice: voice for the pupil, voice for the parent. That is the new frontier for education. Personalised learning aims to engage every parent and every child in the educational experience.

Only if we offer the best to students will we get the best. And it means a school ethos focused on student needs, with the whole school team taking time to find out the needs and interests of the students; with students listened to and their voice used to drive whole school improvement; and with the leadership team providing a clear focus for the progress and achievement of each child (OECD 2006, *Schooling for Tomorrow: personalising education*).

In the United Kingdom the work of David Hargreaves (2004) identifies nine main gateways for personalised learning. Hargreaves asserts that if we are to ensure that every aspect of teaching and support is designed around a student’s needs, then potentially the most powerful gateway for this to occur is through facilitating student voice.

Other researchers (Fielding 2001; Holdsworth 2005) point to the importance of linking student voice with action, arguing that ‘authentic’ student voice is not simply to provide data

for others to make decisions, but that it should encourage young people's active participation in shared decision making and consequent actions.

A significant body of international literature explores how student voice can provide opportunities for students to become active participants in their education, including making decisions about what and how they learn and how their learning is assessed.

PART 1 – A summary of the literature

Student voice – a historical perspective

Evolving definitions

In its modern interpretation, student voice is focused predominantly on the design, facilitation and improvement of learning (Mitra 2004).

Views about the place of young people in schools and society have changed over the past generation. Traditionally, the views and opinions of children were often discounted as having less legitimacy than the views of adults but as attitudes towards children and young people changed, different views have arisen associated with these changes. Over the past two decades schools and education systems have used a range of terms that capture the changing views and developments. For example, in the 1980s, the terminology of the day reflected current values and beliefs about the place of students within schools. Terms such as ‘student empowerment’, ‘student rights’ and ‘student participation’ acknowledged the rights of children and aimed to empower them through various school programs and activities that were regarded as appropriate. Nationally the Schools Commission (1980) was championing a more active role for students in schooling and in Victoria the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education had taken on board projects and activities designed to promote ‘youth participation’ (Cole 1980) and ‘youth action’ (Emmett et al. 1984) in schools.

Hand in hand with the implementation of personalised learning are strong links with constructivist learning theory (Bruner 1966) and recent brain research, both of which emphasise the importance to learning of student autonomy, including students actively determining what they learn and having a role in the direction of their learning.

A major theme in the theoretical framework of constructivist learning is that learning is an active process in which learners connect new knowledge and skills to existing ones and, thus, construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current and past knowledge. This, according to Bruner (1996) should be achieved through the engagement of learners and teachers in an active conversation that involves finding out what students already know, linking new knowledge to existing knowledge and experience, allowing student responses to drive lessons and change strategies, and encouraging and accepting student initiative.

Similarly, evidence from contemporary cognitive psychology highlights the importance of effective cognitive and metacognitive skills in learning. It indicates that learning is not in fact acquired via a building-blocks approach, but it proceeds in many directions at once and at an uneven pace. Dietel and others (1991) contend that to become competent thinkers and problem solvers learners must:

- think and actively construct evolving mental models
- be able to interpret the information they receive and relate it to knowledge they already have

- be active participants in their own learning if they are to become competent thinkers and problem solvers.

This research supports the understanding that student voice is one avenue through which students can explore and construct their own learning, gain more control over the content, direction and method of learning and develop higher-order thinking skills.

‘Voice’ in this context is ‘not simply about the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions; it is about having the power to influence change’ (West 2004). Meaningful involvement of students means ‘validating and authorising them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge and experiences throughout education in order to improve our schools’ (Fletcher 2005). It provides opportunities for them to become active participants in their education, including making decisions about what and how they learn and how their learning is assessed.

Ranson (2000) argues for ‘pedagogy of voice’, which ‘enables learners to explore self and identity, develop self-understanding and self-respect and improve agency, capability and potential’.

David Jackson (2005) maintains that student voice is about valuing people and valuing the learning that results when we engage the capacities and multiple voices in our schools. It focuses on realising the leadership potential inherent within all learners. In practice there are five dimensions to pupil involvement:

1. student involvement in school and community development
2. students as researchers and co-enquirers
3. student feedback on teaching and learning
4. students as peer-tutors
5. student involvement as a manifestation of inclusion principles.

In recent years, the term ‘student voice’ increasingly has been discussed in the school reform literature as a potential avenue for improving student outcomes and facilitating school change (Fielding 2001; Mitra 2003; Rudduck & Flutter 2000). In practice, student voice ranges from the most basic level to sophisticated approaches. At the most basic level, young people share their opinions of problems and potential solutions through student councils or in focus groups associated with school strategic planning. At a more sophisticated level, young people share their ‘voice’ by collaborating with adults to actually improve education outcomes, including helping to ‘improve teaching, curriculum and teacher-student relationships and leading to changes in student assessment and teacher training’ (Mitra 2004).

Today, curriculum approaches include allowing for students’ interests to direct their curriculum and for students to be actively involved in determining what and how they learn. These approaches, which acknowledge the right of students to have ‘a voice’ in their own education and school environment, have been relatively slow in coming.

The critical factor in all of the more recent attempts to define ‘voice’ seems to be that student voice, in the new paradigm, is much more than token consultation with students over such matters as school uniform, or how to reduce littering. Students want to understand why things are done as they are and would like to be able to voice their views about change and to have those views heard (Fielding & Rudduck 2002).

The new definitions involve young people in a true partnership with adults so that they can influence what happens to them at school, and become meaningfully involved in their own learning and in school improvement. The purpose of accessing and facilitating student voice in this sense is to improve the engagement of students and the outcomes of their learning. At the same time, engagement of student voice helps to ensure that student issues within the learning environment are addressed.

The concept of student voice in 2006 has grown from these earlier ideas. It is no longer simply geared to rights and empowerment as it was in the past, but instead focuses on the notion that ‘student outcomes will improve and school reform will be more successful if students actively participate in shaping it’ (Mitra 2004).

Student voice in Victoria

From a Victorian perspective the importance placed on student voice can be identified through various government policies of the past. For example, from 1983-85 the then Victorian Ministry of Education published a series of policy papers that demonstrated changing views and attitudes towards young people. In seeking to ensure success for all students, the sixth policy paper (Ministerial Paper No. 6) stated that schools should ‘ensure that students are clear about what they are expected to accomplish and provide them with increasing opportunities to help determine the educational tasks and goals that are set for them’ (Ministry of Education 1984). Further, schools were encouraged to actively involve students in their learning by having students participating in setting learning goals and reflecting on the effectiveness of their learning. Such activities would lead to the development of skills that were seen as ‘an important basis for lifelong learning’ (Ministry of Education, Schools Division 1988).

...Students can also contribute views about the kinds of learning they feel are most appropriate for them. Teachers, working closely with students and parents, are best placed to choose materials and activities appropriate for individual students. Parents, teaching staff and students who have taken part in planning a school’s curriculum are more likely to be committed to making it work (Ministry of Education 1984).

In the 1990s, the Victorian education system underwent a major reform, expressed in the *Schools of the Future* (SOF) paper (1993) which focused on the concept of self-governing schools. Through devolved school autonomy, schools were given the responsibility for managing school global budgets, developing school charters and codes of conduct and taking increased responsibility in decision-making, priority setting and managing resources.

Curriculum standards and levels were set for student achievement in eight key learning areas and schools monitored the way these standards were being achieved. Schools were

accountable to both the local community and to the Minister for Education on how they were meeting the standards through various school review processes.

The *Schools of the Future* initiative (Directorate of School Education 1994) recommended that teachers draw upon different levels of course advice materials in order to meet the needs of all students and to decide which approaches were most appropriate to meet the needs of a particular student or group of students. The place of students, from a student voice perspective was not specifically articulated in the SOF reform policies. However, there was provision within the school review process to survey teacher, student and parent views of the quality of service and teaching and learning conditions at a given school. The student surveys were optional and survey results were used by schools, school councils and school leadership teams to guide aspects of school improvement.

The *Blueprint for Government Schools* (Department of Education & Training 2003) was the next major reform in Victoria and was developed through an extensive consultation process involving education ministers, key school and departmental staff, academics, parents and other key stakeholder groups and organisations. The *Blueprint* included a number of ‘flagship’ strategies including the development of a broad framework of essential learnings for all Victorian students. The notion of student voice is implicit in a number of the strategies. For example, the *Principles of Learning and Teaching* (PoLT) (DE&T 2004) stresses the importance of creating learning environments that promote independence, interdependence and self-motivation. PoLT recommends that student opinions be canvassed and for teachers to ensure that class discussions are not dominated by the teacher’s voice. Further, teachers are encouraged to use strategies that build skills required for productive collaboration as a means of enabling students to actively participate in the negotiation of roles, responsibilities and outcomes.

Student voice: an international perspective

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) highlights children’s right to participate. Article 12 states children should be free to express their views and to be heard, while Article 13 asserts that children have the right of freedom of expression, freedom to seek and impart information through any media of the child’s choice.

In 1992 UNICEF presented educators with a way to measure situations and activities that involve students throughout schools to ensure that student voice is more than ‘tokenism. Sociologist Roger Hart developed a widely used conceptual model for youth participation called the ‘Ladder of Participation’ based on the premise that participation is a fundamental right of citizenship (Hart 1992). Hart used the analogy of a ladder to describe progressive levels of participation in society. The lower rungs reflect symbolic or token participation. The highest rung of the ladder is genuine participation, which Hart describes as student-initiated activities in which the role of adults is to provide support.

The Department of Education and Skills in the United Kingdom presented its *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* in 2004. One of the reform principles underpinning the

strategy was greater personalisation and choice as being at the heart of better public services and higher standards. The strategy aimed to ensure a stronger voice for children in the development of policy and the design of services in every phase of learning. As well as the choice of an excellent secondary school, ‘every student should, within their school, have excellent teaching that suits them, building on what they know, fitting them for what they aspire to, and helping them reach their full potential’. To deliver the goal of student choice and voice as a driver for reform, the strategy included plans for a national survey of students’ views about the quality of their courses to take place in 2005, the results to be published in a clear and accessible form, to help other prospective students to make choices which are right for them.

In 2004 the National Youth Agency in the United Kingdom produced its own set of seven participatory standards (Table 1) written by young people. The seven standards allow schools to map the extent and quality of student participation they provide and was designed to be used as a planning tool to improve the level and quality of student voice in future programs and activities.

Table 1: Participatory standards

The Building Standards (for the active involvement of children and young people)	
Evidence of Listening	The organisation can describe and demonstrate how children and young people have been listened to on specific issues.
	Children and young people can describe and demonstrate how plans have been put in place to respond to what they say.
Evidence of Planning	The organisation can describe and demonstrate how plans have been put in place in response to what children and young people have said.
	Children and young people can describe and demonstrate how plans have been put in place in response to what they have said.
Evidence of Change	The organisation can describe and demonstrate what changes have resulted.
	Children and young people who have been involved can describe and demonstrate what changes have resulted.
	A wider group of children and young people and others in the community can describe and demonstrate improvements in response to the specific issues.

Why engage student voice?

Studies show that students themselves yearn for deeper engagement throughout their education (Kushman 1997). A survey of high schools in Kentucky (Patmor 1998) asked students and teachers about their expectations and their experiences with school decision making. He found that both groups strongly agreed that students should be involved in decisions about extracurricular issues, which classes students take, how time is used during the day, and discipline and classroom management policies. Wade and Putnam (1995) found that ninth and tenth graders attending a summer program for gifted students wanted ‘to participate in leadership activities that are meaningful and that hold some degree of real responsibility’.

Students today are the first to have experienced from birth the ‘computerisation of society’ (Fielding & Rudduck 2002). Many of them have important parts of their formal and informal learning taking place in life away from school, including part-time employment. Many have more money to spend, and more opportunities for self-expression. In addition, today’s young people are ‘consumers’ who expect schools, like businesses, to be responsive to the market place, including being flexible in meeting their needs, rather than expecting them to conform to meet the needs of business – or schools. Fielding and Rudduck maintain that if schools are to reflect the different capabilities of this new generation they need to respond to ‘repeated calls from students for responsibility, more opportunities to contribute to decision-making, more opportunities for dialogue about learning and the conditions of learning’.

In contrast, many see a growing gap between their lives and the lives of those who are successful in education. Ensuring educational success for all is a key tenet of all education authorities throughout Australia. The research shows that when schools engage student voice they create opportunities to facilitate a stronger sense of:

- membership, so that students feel more positive about school
- respect and self-worth, so that students feel positive about themselves
- self as learner, so that students are better able to manage their own progress in learning
- agency, so that students realise that they can have impact on things that matter to them in school (Fielding & Rudduck 2002).

In best practice approaches, student voice may also ‘make real’ some of the highest education aims. For example, it may:

- increase the involvement of historically disengaged and underachieving students (Mohamed & Wheeler 2001)
- promote citizenship and social inclusion, as well as social responsibility (ibid.)
- enhance personal and social education and development, assisting students to become more confident and resilient (Cruddas 2005).

David Jackson (2005) promotes six reasons why student involvement and student voice strategies make sense. They are:

- educational values: valuing the learning that results when we engage the capacities of the multiple voices in our schools
- community values: school communities characterised by collaborative, aspirational, optimistic and high challenge cultures.
- rights: students are a significant voice in schools
- social responsibilities: young people have rights and responsibilities now enshrined in international law
- legitimacy: the authenticity of student perspectives about learning and school community
- pragmatics: if students are not allowed to change what they do, then we will never transform learning.

The use and promotion of student voice

A search of the literature provides many examples (Grace 1999; Gordon 2003; Cruddas 2005) of schools involving students in education planning and improvement. They include: students participating in curricular planning meetings; co-creating new school designs and facilities; planning the school day; and planning and constructing learning units, with the assistance of teachers. The form of participation by students in education planning and improvement is generally by way of focus groups, surveys or joining with teachers in discussions on school planning days.

Other studies have accentuated the importance of linking 'voice' to 'action' (Fielding 2001; Holdsworth 2005). They have seen the central issue of student voice not as one of providing data for others to make decisions, but as integral to encouraging young people's active participation in shared decisions and consequent action about their own present and futures. This participation is strongly linked with the constructivist theory (Bruner 1966) of learning which emphasises the importance of students actively determining what they learn and having a role in the direction of their learning.

Fielding's (2001) framework for evaluating the conditions for student voice is presented through a series of questions which need to be answered to probe what he calls the 'rhetoric and realities of student voice'.

Fielding identifies nine sets of questions about student voice. They are:

1. Who is allowed to speak?
2. Who listens?
3. What skills are required and what support is provided for their development?
4. What attitudes and dispositions are needed to transform skills into meaningful realities?
5. What systems are needed to sustain this kind of work?
6. What kinds of organisational culture need to be developed to enable Student voice to thrive?
7. What spaces, both physical and metaphorical are needed for participants to make meaning together?
8. What are the implications for action?
9. What are some of the key considerations to take into account in helping Student voice to be and become a significant part of the process of communal renewal?

Research findings suggest the following.

- Some young people, particularly middle class girls, are more willing to speak than others while those who are perhaps least served by schools are less willing to speak.

- Often students are not able to speak to those who have the power to change what happens in schools.
- The subjects that students are encouraged to speak about are often of low level importance, while important matters such as teaching and learning are largely forbidden areas for student voice.
- Because people adjust their behaviour depending on the context, student discourse may be inhibited. The student/teacher relationship is one of a fragile power balance. It is one of internally and externally subjective judgement that impacts the personal efficacy of both teacher and student. Within such a context, it is little wonder that traditional power relationships and learning delimitations generally provide long tested security, if little challenge or support for deeper learning.
- The very people who most benefit by maintaining the system as it is; that is, those who find success in the system, are also the most likely to be involved in consultation and conversation, while the most disengaged are least likely to raise their voices.

Student voice and student engagement

Recent research studies have emphasised the importance of student voice in building engagement in and with schools (the UK ESRC Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning Project; Fielding & Bragg 2003; Johnson & O'Brien 2002). Significant in this research has been the finding that, when students are given a voice, they become more engaged with learning. Moreover, teachers gain insight into how to support student engagement and build more positive and collaborative relationships with students. Given the recognition in educational research literature of the importance of student engagement in effective learning, such insights constitute valuable professional learning.

The Australian Curriculum Studies Association (1996) identified enhancing student engagement in learning as a key challenge particularly associated with the middle years of schooling.

As part of its middle years strategy, the Victorian Department of Education, in collaboration with the Department of Justice, set up the Student Action Teams Program in 1998. The program was designed to provide opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution including opportunities for valued responsibilities, making decisions, being heard and contributing to community. In a Student Action Team, a group of students identify and tackle a school or community issue: they research the issue, make plans and proposals about it, and take action on it. An evaluation of the program identified gains in the personal development of students including enhanced self-esteem, school commitment and communication and teamwork skills (Holdsworth 2000).

Cole (2006) also suggests that dissatisfaction and disengagement with schooling peaks at Year 9. Young adolescents are not willing to be passive recipients of the education provided to them. Cole suggests that to increase engagement, students should be identified as active agents in their own learning and be provided with greater choice and responsibility for co-constructing learning and reflecting on the process of learning itself.

The *Taking Young People Seriously* handbooks (Youth Affairs Council of Victoria 2004) are a series of resources exploring young people's participation in their communities. They were developed by the Youth Affairs Council and the Office for Youth, Department for Victorian Communities as the product of a partnership project called Participation in Practice. The handbooks outline some principles of young people's participation and practical advice that help ensure that young people are included, empowered and purposefully engaged.

Student voice and whole school improvement

Mitra and Frick (2004), argue that what is missing in the discussion of school reform is ‘the question of ownership – that is, who gets to define what the problems of a school are, and who gets to try to improve them?’ They suggest that asking for student opinions, and listening to student voices, reminds teachers that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools and their learning which adults cannot replicate. They also suggest that school improvement is positively impacted upon by listening to student experiences, particularly the experiences of those who are alienated and struggling.

Mitra and Frick outline a number of research projects where students, through presenting a different perspective on student learning and engagement with their schools, impact on school improvement. They make the case that real improvement is more than just collecting data from students, although listening might be the first step, and it certainly offers rewards in encouraging school personnel to challenge their assumptions about problems and solutions available to them.

When, however, students are involved in collaboration and leadership, there are rewards in youth development and overall growth that not only result in particular school improvement initiatives, but also meet fundamental developmental needs of students, particularly those least engaged in schooling. Real change in schools results, Mitra and Frick argue, when schools take risks by offering students opportunities to build adult-student partnerships.

Involving students as partners in their education strengthens their self-esteem and respect and provides practical agendas for improvement that have student support.

Student voice: considerations for schools

Local and international research identifies a number of challenges related to student voice. One such challenge for schools in providing opportunities for authentic student voice relates to the skills students require to ‘articulate what is important, insightful or relevant to anything other than the more trivial or insignificant of matters’ (Fielding & Rudduck 2002). Fielding asks:

- Are the skills of dialogue *encouraged and supported* through training or other appropriate means?
- Are those skills understood, developed and practised within the *context of democratic values and dispositions*?
- Are those skills themselves *transformed* by those values and dispositions?

Of equal importance is the attitude of teachers and administrators to students being allowed a say in what happens to them at school, particularly if what they are discussing is how and what they are taught. For many educators, student voice can be threatening, particularly if it is given equal weight with ‘teacher voice’ (Fielding & Rudduck 2002). Because what students have to say about teaching and learning may be threatening to teachers, the temptation might be to silence student voice or to limit it to areas of relative safety, such as school uniform, litter policy, the colour of school walls, etc.

The Consulting Students about Teaching and Learning project in the UK is a sound source of information about some of the difficulties in implementing student voice. The finding from this research was that consulting with students is not easy, and finding time and space in the curriculum are major obstacles for the implementation of student voice.

The dilemma for teachers is that students are very perceptive about recognising ‘token’ consultation, but the pressures of lack of time can result in teachers squeezing student voice into the curriculum and then not following through on student suggestions. There is also a problem if what students are asked about seems unimportant to them. The researchers on the UK project found that students quickly tired of invitations to express their views on matters such as school uniform, particularly if they found that nothing happened as a result of the consultation, or that no real action was taken on matters that actually affected the quality of their school life.

Teacher professional development

Current literature almost universally assumes that professional development for teachers and administrators ‘lies at the centre of instructional improvement’ (Elmore & Burney 1997).

One of the central principles of good practice in professional development is feedback (Joyce & Showers 1982). In the past this feedback has come from skilled practitioners with expertise about good teaching. The data from the UK’s Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning project suggests that reflection on practice, without listening to student voices, is limiting the evidence and the challenges to thoughts that are critical to honest reflection. The research

suggests that if teachers are to provide experiences that engage students and involve them in constructing their own learning, they must first listen to what their students have to say (ESRC).

Research indicates that implementing student voice in schools requires training and professional development of teachers in a number of areas, including providing access to the philosophy and research around student voice, developing skills to implement student voice, and providing support for both students and teachers in their efforts to work together to improve outcomes. The Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning project in the UK suggested some key principles that need to be embedded in professional development activities on student voice. These included:

- reassuring teachers, pupils, parents and governors that consulting pupils is recognised nationally as both legitimate and desirable
- building up support among teachers (who may be sceptical) by presenting evidence of the positive outcomes of consultation
- being sensitive to the anxiety experienced by teachers who have not before consulted pupils about teaching and learning
- encouraging and supporting initiatives among volunteers, including newly qualified teachers
- devising procedures which allow teachers to observe and learn from one another's consultative practices
- making innovative practice public, sensitively and supportively
- ensuring that other school policies and initiatives are in harmony with the values that underpin pupil consultation
- modelling behaviour which demonstrates openness to learning from pupils
- ensuring that consultation is pursued through a range of avenues and not seen as something simply for a school council
- developing links with other schools that have ideas and practices to share
- organising workshops and inviting facilitators (preferably teachers) who can demonstrate, advise and support new forms of consultation
- giving student voice a central place in school self-evaluation.

In addition, researchers point out that teachers need to develop some specific skills that may or may not be included in current pre-service and in-service training. From the case studies of activities that have been undertaken in Canada, the UK, the USA and Australia, some of these skills are obvious; others may be inferred. Suggesting the need for explicit training, these skills are, *inter alia*:

- analytical skills that allow teachers to access the research around student voice and adapt it to suit their needs and contexts
- collaborative skills needed for effective participation in groups, including both participation and facilitation processes
- skills in how to use and interpret data and to institute appropriate change as suggested by the data
- skills in using consensual decision-making processes
- skills in integrating student voice into meaningful involvement with the curriculum
- well developed research skills to both assist students in their own research and undertake their own action research
- skills in and commitment to change management.

While the explicit inclusion of the research on and skills development in making use of student voice is needed in teacher pre-service training, there may also be a need to have student voices involved with and represented in discussions about the content and processes in pre-service training. Similarly, student voices could to be involved with and represented at teacher professional learning activities, many of which can be supported *in situ* within the classroom.

International case studies

Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning Project, UK

The Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning Project was part of the UK Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Program. It involved the analysis of data gathered from 48 primary and secondary schools located in different parts of the UK. The schools took part in a three year research project, completed between 2001 and 2003.

The Teaching and Learning Research Program involved a network of six projects:

1. how teachers respond to students' ideas on improving teaching and learning
2. ways of consulting students about teaching and learning
3. student perspectives and participation: starting and sustaining the process
4. the potential of students to act as (co)researchers in the process of teaching and learning
5. how the conditions of learning in school and classroom affect the identity and participation of different groups of students
6. breaking new ground: innovative initiatives involving student consultation and participation.

In four of these projects teachers were engaged in developing consultation with students. Research teams offered support, documented progress, and helped to monitor impact. Two of the projects were researcher-led, with the agenda set by the project team. These research projects investigated: (1) how teachers make use of student commentary on teaching and learning; and (2) what insight pupils can offer about the social interaction of the classroom.

The aims of the project were to:

- identify strategies which help teachers consult students about teaching and learning
- gather evidence of the power of students' comments to improve teaching and learning
- gather evidence of the impact of consultation on students, teachers and schools
- develop ways of building consultation into the organisational structure of schools.

Evidence of the impact on classrooms and schools was collected: via the testimony of students and teachers using documentation and audio recordings of the views of students, teachers and the school principal, in individual interviews and group discussions; through observation in classrooms; through videos of class interactions; and in examination of the products of classroom work and workshop activities. In addition, the impact of the consultation was confirmed through an end-of-project survey of 96 teachers.

Outcomes

Researchers involved in this project (Flutter & Rudduck 2004; Arnot et al. 2003; Fielding & Bragg 2003; MacBeath et al. 2003) concluded that consulting with students engaged them by promoting active participation in their own learning. Students were more engaged when they saw that their opinions were listened to and used to transform pedagogical and organisational practices.

In addition, the researchers found that student voice lifted students' self-esteem and yielded practical agendas that transformed teachers' knowledge of students, transformed practice and transformed student-teacher relationships.

Teachers reported a new sense of excitement about their teaching as a result of student participation in the project. Teachers also appreciated the deeper insight they developed into students' capabilities and the practical agendas for improvement arising from the project. Finally, they reported that the project influenced their practice as they gained insight into how to support engagement and build more positive and collaborative relationships with their students.

For schools, the benefits were improved engagement of students with their schools and with learning and the fact that students were able to identify with the practical agendas for change which arose from the project. Because the projects engendered partnerships with teachers, student-teacher relationships were improved, students experienced democratic principles and processes, and the capacity of schools as learning organisations was increased.

Specifically, with regard to the research projects, the researchers found that consulting with students carried the potential to change and improve classroom teaching and learning, and that teachers were able to see the potential of consultation to assist them in planning and practice.

The four development and research projects provided consistent evidence from both teachers and students that student voice stimulated a more positive attitude to learning.

Although the researchers found benefits for teachers, students and schools as a result of involvement in the projects, they cautioned that these benefits were dependent on, 'among other things ... clarity of purpose, a careful climate setting, an ability and willingness to listen and an understanding of what consultation really means'.

Whitman High School, California, USA

Improving engagement and a sense of belonging through student voice

A Californian initiative, the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) is an example of how a jurisdiction is approaching the use of student voice in education to improve student developmental outcomes.

In a study at Whitman High School in California, as part of BASRC, Mitra (2004) collected data on two student voice activities – the Pupil School Collaborative (PSC) and the Student Forum.

The focus of the PSC activities was to assist newcomer Latino students with tutoring and translation assistance by working alongside them in classrooms or withdrawing them for additional help. The reform effort allowed students and teachers to work together to improve relationships within their school. In this instance, students not only expressed opinions in focus groups, they also conducted the analysis of the data.

The Student Forum group consisted of thirty students, across age, race and gender, and ranging from potential 'drop-outs' to the president of the student council. Their focus was to seek student participation in efforts to reform the school by injecting student voice into building communication and partnerships school-wide between students and teachers.

The school followed up this exercise with staff development sessions on curriculum reform which involved students. Students were trained before the session to know the goals, as well as concepts, such as standards, assessment, curriculum, multiple intelligences etc. to assist them to actively participate. Teachers were informed that students were 'partners in the conversation' that would take place during the session and rules were described for the session. For example, individual teachers or students could not be named.

Outcomes

Mitra's analysis of the data arising from this project revealed that young people who participated displayed evidence of marked increases in the personal and social assets that youth development researchers assert are necessary for students to succeed in society. In particular, there was a strong increase in agency, belonging, and competence.

Students' sense of agency increased because they felt they had the opportunity to:

- articulate their opinions and have their views heard
- construct new roles as change makers in the school
- increase their power as decision-makers who could 'make a difference'
- develop leadership skills, including an increasing sense of responsibility to help others in need.

Students' sense of belonging and self-worth also increased. They developed a sense of ownership in the school, greater connection to caring adults and to teachers in general, and increased pride in their school. They felt that people were listening to their perspectives and that teachers had a deeper understanding and receptiveness to the difficulties in their lives.

Students increased their competence. They reported that they observed marked changes in themselves, including developing new skills and a more positive outlook on their school and their lives overall. In particular, there was growth in the competencies of:

- critiquing the environment
- problem solving and facilitation skills needed to keep an organisation focused and moving forward
- cooperating and negotiating with others

- speaking publicly.

In addition, teachers reported that:

- students were increasingly willing to collaborate
- student-focused activities seemed to reduce tension between teachers and students and to help teachers and students to identify one another as people rather than stereotypes
- student participation in meetings changed the tenor so that reform-resistant staff members were less likely to engage in unprofessional behaviour, such as completing crosswords or reading, during staff meetings and were less likely to openly show hostility to colleagues.

While students at Whitman High School also reported increased engagement with their school, their teachers and their studies, two interesting outcomes arose from the Whitman school case study as a result of the work of students as researchers. The first was the empowerment and enhanced learning for students who learned how to conduct research and present findings in a socially acceptable way. The second was the hostility displayed by some teachers, a small minority, who were offended by the students' presentation of their research findings.

As a result of the involvement of students in this project, students reported:

- studying harder because their participation in school reform had given them a greater understanding of the system and what it takes to get to university
- taking more responsibility for homework and study
- they felt more part of the school community and participated more in other activities in the school
- improved and increased communication between students and teachers.

Teachers also reported that the process had helped them better understand students and made them better teachers because they had a greater understanding of student issues. The findings indicate that, not only does engaging student voice provide the opportunity to improve learning outcomes, it also provides scope for whole school improvement through feedback about what works for learning.

Seacrest High School, California, USA

Improving educational outcomes through student voice

Through another Bay Area School Reform initiative Mitra describes how Seacrest High School examined the issue of why a large percentage of students in their first two years of secondary school were failing (Mitra 2001).

Seacrest High teachers and administrators decided that a critical step in understanding why students were not successful was to ask the failing students themselves. Students who had received failing grades in three or more subjects were invited to participate in a focus group,

led by a senior teacher of the school. The students were encouraged to speak openly and honestly about how teachers could make schools a better place to learn. In addition to working with students, the students' teachers were asked to complete a survey about why they believed the students were failing. Following the initial focus group, Seacrest High continued to supply opportunities for student voice by holding eight more focus groups within the year of the project.

Outcomes

The major outcome of the Seacrest High School project was the clarity it provided for teachers with regard to what was affecting student success. Students taking part in focus groups at Seacrest High School spoke about such things as different learning styles, the need for additional counselling and tutoring and having a sense of mutual respect between teachers and students. Teachers talked about student lack of motivation (30 per cent) and attendance (16.5 per cent).

Students of all backgrounds and academic abilities were able to point to aspects of school structure and teaching that they believed contributed to their, or their classmates, failure; while teachers pointed to the students being to blame for their own failure. The importance of looking at the problem from a different perspective was that it shifted the focus from teachers and students blaming each other, to teachers and students working together to improve teaching and learning. At the conclusion of the project, students reported an increased sense of engagement with their school and teachers were provided with specific issues to target in the upcoming year.

The Manitoba School Improvement Project, Canada

Improving secondary school for students at risk

In 1991 the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation (WDGF) began a program of school improvement in Manitoba, with an emphasis on improving secondary schooling, particularly for students at risk. Over time, this program grew into the Manitoba School Improvement Program (MSIP) and involved 31 secondary schools in total, comprising three separate groups over three timeframes.

Amongst other things, the MSIP framework for school improvement describes student learning, curriculum, and instruction as the goals and suggests that schools can reach these goals by mobilising the involvement of teachers, students, parents, and the community; connecting to the outside world; broadening leadership; engaging in inquiry and reflection; creating coherence and integration; and increasing the schools' capacity for change.

One of the notable aspects of the project has been the increasing focus on student voice. Starting in 1998 and building on earlier successes in engaging students at various schools as researchers or evaluators (Bryant, Lee & Levin 1997), the initiative has helped to raise a level of consciousness within Manitoba of the importance of students as critical stakeholders in education, particularly as evaluators. The premise underpinning the MSIP is that having

students shape the questions that need to be asked in their schools and then collect, analyse and present the results provides students with a powerful voice.

Outcomes

An evaluation of the project (Earl et al. 2003) drew the following conclusions.

Group 1 schools (those involved in the MISP initiative 1991-97) reported the most success, identifying MSIP as a catalyst for change and for the broadening of leadership among staff of the schools involved. The schools had most success in school improvement initiatives and had made early gains on measures of student learning. They had maintained or increased learning on some outcome measures and continued to focus on their school improvement processes.

Group 2 (1998-99) and Group 3 (2000-01) schools reported an increasing recognition of the need to use data in planning and evaluation. However, many of the schools struggled to find ways to measure their success and ensure coherence in their initiatives. They also had, in 2003, seen little impact on student learning outcomes in their schools.

In the 2003 evaluation, the researchers found that there had been some decline in overall measures of engagement in the project schools from 1997 to 2002. In contrast, a positive correlation was established between an increase in student voice in the school culture and an increase in school attachment. Indeed, Earl and Lee (1999) reported that students who had been unreachable and disengaged were some of the most passionate participants in the school reform process once they became involved.

An important outcome from this project was that, while student voice can be a positive process for contributing to school improvement, the researchers found that school improvement initiatives that are not sustained will not be effective in engaging students and increasing academic performance and social connection. Student voice alone is insufficient to drive school reform.

PART 2 – Student voice in Australia

Jurisdictional support for and use of student voice

This section of the research paper discusses how student voice is supported in Australian jurisdictions. This includes system-level work that has been or is being carried out in Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory, as well as examples of individual schools that have been, and are, experimenting with student voice.

Victoria

Fitzroy High School

Student voice in teaching and learning

Under the Victorian Leading Schools Fund initiative, Fitzroy High School has developed a strategic plan which aims to monitor the incorporation of student voice into the teaching and learning culture.

This approach is based on the premise that learning is driven by what teachers and students do in classrooms, and the activity of teachers in classrooms can be improved when students provide feedback about teaching and learning.

The plan requires teachers to move from Stage 1 to Stage 4 in a learning continuum. The movement of individual students along the continuum is tracked and mapped.

Stage 1 No involvement: students are not asked for their opinion.

Stage 2 Listening: eliciting student perspectives as data

Passive Role: student as information source. Students are asked for their opinion as in a class discussion, focus group or school survey.

Stage 3 Collaborating: sharing planning and decision making

Active Role: student as participant. Students work collaboratively with others and share opinions.

Stage 4 Leading

Directive Role: students take the lead in design and research into effective teaching and learning.

In moving towards a more active role, students become participants in school improvement efforts, influencing the process through conducting action research.

The overall objectives of the plan are to:

- develop in students a more positive attitude to school and to learning
- improve teacher effectiveness

- provide students with opportunities to learn and grow.

Lowanna College

Problem-based learning model

The pedagogical approach being implemented by Lowanna College uses a problem based learning model that engages student interest to identify questions and work towards solutions.

This approach:

- links with work already commenced in the college, i.e. integrated curriculum, middle years reforms and significant teachers at Years 7 and 8, and project work at Year 9
- promotes student involvement and responsibility for learning
- provides scope for students to make choices within a broad framework
- maximises opportunities for students to personalise their learning by incorporating student voice into unit design and student choice into how, what, where and with whom they work.

Within this model, students learn to take responsibility and exercise control in the learning process. Formative assessment guides student choice to the appropriate level while student interest and learning style informs choice in content. The use of problem based learning is a vehicle to engage interest and challenges students to accept responsibility for their learning.

Teachers and students make this change by:

- focusing on ‘learning to learn’ and supporting the learning process
- enabling a planned approach to problem solving
- using thinking tools to aid problem solving
- using ICT for research and problem solving
- personalising learning for students through choice
- focusing on the process of learning, as well as the content.

Mordialloc College

Student initiated learning program

Mordialloc College has created an open learning environment which is currently the home for Year 7 students who spend the first three periods of a four period day there. The centre is used by Year 8 students for the afternoon period when Year 7 students are using specialist facilities.

A team of nine teachers is responsible for all students in the centre.

Each teacher (guide) has a pastoral responsibility for a ‘family’ of Year 7 students. The teaching and learning program is based on student initiated learning and projects with a strong community connectedness, delivered in flexible groups.

Students, with the support of teachers, develop ways of producing projects that will help them learn and demonstrate their understanding and knowledge of the essential learning elements listed on a capacity matrix. Some compulsory tasks are included that form the basis of essential learning building blocks. The capacity matrix is also linked to a resource matrix and students use the 'Self Help' system to assist their learning, e.g. they try it (self), they refer to a resource (as indicated on the matrix) or they ask a friend or a teacher. At this stage they may request a specific workshop if they feel they need to improve their skills or attend a compulsory workshop.

The family guide takes responsibility for checking that the students in their family meet each of the essential learning elements.

Mount Dandenong Primary School

Developing leadership through an authentic approach to student voice

This project evolved from the belief that the school was paying lip service to the idea of students playing a leadership role in their school life. Despite the fact that the school had a Junior School Council and House Captains, their roles were small and responsibilities were minimal. The school decided that their 'voice' as student leaders was not clearly heard and certainly did not impact on the running of the school, or the lives of students.

The central aim of the project was, therefore, to develop a more powerful and meaningful voice within the student community by consulting with staff and senior students on the qualities required in their student leaders and inviting potential student leaders to deliver prepared speeches to assembly to demonstrate their leadership qualities.

In the first year of the project, it is reported that students voted for the 'coolest kids'. However, after further exploration of roles and responsibilities, choices in subsequent years have been more measured and successful with candidates using the opportunity to further develop their leadership skills.

The second phase of the project focused on House Captains, and the fact that once their duties in organising House sports were over, their role was finished. The school believed that to have any impact on the development of student learning, the roles allocated to students must be authentic. In 2004 therefore, the school implemented the Senior Leadership Team, comprising the eight Grade 6 House Captains. The House Captains meet on a regular basis, have a formal meeting structure from which minutes are taken, and discuss issues from a pre-planned agenda.

At the time of reporting on the project, the Senior Leadership Team had:

- organised a working bee to create a new Grade 6 garden
- taken a series of photographs of the working bee, and of other events, courtesy of the team publicity officer
- organised the official opening of the garden. This involved: sending notices to the Grade 6 students and invitations to the special guests including the parents who

helped with the working bee; inviting the principal to make a speech and cut the ribbon; and organising the food, decorating and clean-up for the party.

- written ‘thank you’ letters to parents and organisations who helped with the project
- participated actively in the ‘Readiness for School’ evening with students writing speeches and practising them during the meetings. Techniques of public speaking were considered and put into practice. Students greeted the guests, spoke to the meeting about aspects of school life, led tours and served the guests with supper.

Staff at the school reported that the children have really progressed as leaders, that they take their roles seriously, and that they are really excited by the challenges presented to them. By allowing students to have a voice, they have grown in self-confidence, developed their decision making skills, and further developed their speaking, listening and oral presentation skills. Individual self-esteem has risen and students have discovered how problems are solved in groups, the school and the community. Students have learned that they can take responsibility for their own school environment and learning community.

Waverley Links Program

Using student voice in student leadership programs

The Waverley Links Program involved a group of Victorian government primary schools comprising Brandon Park, Highvale, Pinewood, Monash and Syndal South.

The aim of the program was to develop student leadership skills in order that the ‘voice’ of school leaders in the school could be more effective. Central to this was a leadership training program, conducted over two days, which was attended by 50 School and House Captains from the participating schools.

Students were trained to perform leadership duties, such as public speaking, listening to and being able to clarify the issues of the student body they represented, writing articles for school newsletters, conducting, chairing and participating in formal student meetings, as well as modelling for other students the preferred values of the school.

Included in the program was also a visit to the local government offices to meet the Mayor. Here, the young leaders learned about decision making within local government and gained an appreciation of meeting protocols and the importance of open and transparent decision making. Students recognised the importance of keeping a record of meetings and learned the terminology required. They also had the opportunity to enjoy, and learn from, being part of a newly formed network of students and to develop common understandings about their roles.

On the first day of the workshop School Support Officers conducted a three hour session to explore the question of ‘what makes an effective leader?’ The facilitators attempted to:

- draw out the concepts of empathic listening, approachability, sympathy, confidence and integrity

- introduce problem solving and decision making scenarios which help students to focus on social dilemmas they may be confronted with at school
- explore effective communication skills, including helping students to understand that good communication means being aware of context
- assist students to develop assertiveness skills
- encourage self-evaluation and reflection.

On the second day of the program the students visited each others' schools and at each venue 'home' students played 'host' to the other students, providing a guided tour and a two minute speech of welcome, a self-profile, and information about their role within the school. In preparation for the school visits, the students were able to draw on the knowledge they had gained, in addition to further support from their teacher or principal, to develop their speech and to format the school tour schedule.

Student Circles

This process has been used in many schools a means for getting student input into how the school is travelling and how it might be improved. It is also a means for getting staff to review and discuss what they are doing.

Whilst the process is highly structured, it can be adapted to suit a variety of settings, student age groups and timeframes. The essential idea is for the whole school to stop what it is doing and take time out to reflect on a few key questions of importance to the school – perhaps generated by the leadership team, students, parents or members of the broader school community. Student Circles focus on questions that require a strong student voice.

The process involves the identification of several questions and then assembling students into groups to collect their responses to the questions. The level of sophistication of the questions would need to be appropriately matched to the age and capacity of the students.

As the intent is to surface areas or ideas for school improvement questions would usually focus on curriculum, teaching and learning and/or other general aspects of the school. For example, young children might be asked:

- What lessons do you enjoy most?
- What lessons could be improved?
- What things do you like about school?
- What would you like to change about school?

Student Circles in the primary school tend to follow the processes outlined below.

- A Student Circle consists of 8-12 students of mixed ages P-6 and is facilitated by an adult – i.e. a teacher, parent, support staff or adult volunteer.
- All students across the school are allocated to a Student Circle and assigned a facilitator and meeting location.

- All Student Circle groups are convened at the same time. The process could take up to 2-3 hours.
- All children in the Student Circle are given the opportunity to speak. Facilitators encourage and assist all students in the Student Circle to express a view. Students are not to speak when someone else is speaking or to put down the ideas of other students. (An object such as a ball can be used to give a student authority to speak and this is passed around the group from one speaker to the next. A student can pass if they do not want to say anything.)
- Student views are recorded by the adult facilitator and collated into a chart showing the number of children who referred to the same aspect.
- Responses are analysed and those aspects of school that most students felt could be improved are identified for further consideration.
- Suggestions are documented and students are asked to vote for the two or three improvement suggestions they most support (taking on more than a few suggestions at a time is likely to result in a failure to meet students' expectations).
- A chart of students' most important suggestions and the voting pattern is distributed to classes so that students can see the ongoing results of their involvement in the Student Circle activity.
- The best ways to implement students' suggestions are discussed (students could also be involved in this aspect either through another Student Circle or focus group activity) and develop an implementation plan to guide implementation of the best suggestions.
- Implementation plans are communicated to students.
- Students are followed-up to see if the implemented suggestions are adequately meeting the needs they identified.

This process is a quick means for engaging all of the students in thinking about the school and its needs, for demonstrating inclusive and open decision making processes, for assisting students to reflect on aspects of the school, for demonstrating that student opinions are important and that issues identified by them will be treated with seriousness.

ruMAD? – Student voice in the community

Education Foundation Australia runs an inquiry-based curriculum program called ruMAD? (aRe yoU Making A Difference?) which enables students to make a difference in their school or community, providing innovative learning through social change. Students develop a skilled and articulate voice not only within the school but as change agents and leaders in their community.

ruMAD? helps students identify a problem and take planned steps to right it. These are real world situations in which students have purposeful responsibilities with actual consequences,

where they can fail and where they are responsible for success. The change-making experience sees them working as colleagues with a rich range of organisations, partners and mentors and trains them in the use of industry standard tools and professional processes.

An independent evaluation shows that ruMAD? builds students' leadership skills, self-confidence and responsibility for their own learning. It also shows that the ruMAD? model is most successful when students take genuine ownership of the process.

The story of students in one small rural school exemplifies the ruMAD? experience. Whitfield District Primary School serves a small agricultural township in the King River valley 170 kilometres northeast of Melbourne. Jessie's Creek, which passes through the township and borders the school, had become an eyesore. It was overgrown with exotic creepers, ivy and blackberries and used as a dump for refuse. The community had abandoned attempts to regenerate it.

In 2002, using the ruMAD? framework, students at the school took up the challenge. They started by trying to clear and revegetate the creek but soon recognised that the task was too big to tackle alone and began to raise community awareness about the issue.

After carrying out a biodiversity study, students surveyed community attitudes and produced a brochure promoting the problems and potential future of the site. They issued a press release, shared their findings with the Wilderness Society and Greening Australia and made live presentations to the North East Catchment Management Authority and the King Basin Landcare group. The Authority responded by conducting a comprehensive assessment of the problems and the work required.

With the assistance of the Authority, students further developed its Water Watch program and helped trial the effects of weed matting and intensive plantings of grasses and sedges. Their campaign won grants totaling \$26,000 from the Commonwealth Environmental Fund and Australian Geographic that have been used to transform the creek. It has also involved the Rural City of Wangaratta, Green Corps, VicRoads and the Typo Station Youth Opportunity Program.

The school won the 2005 Westpac Landcare Education Award for this work. As the students said:

You have to believe in what you are doing and make a fuss to get things moving. People were surprised that kids could do this stuff (Grade 6 students, Whitfield District Primary School).

Student Virtual Parliament

Whilst not strictly a Victorian example, several Victorian schools are included in the list of around 150 Australian schools along with other schools internationally that have registered to become users of the Student Virtual Parliament website <<http://www.schoolpoll.com/>>. This commercial website is a tool for capturing 'student voice' as it provides web-based polling software for schools. It can be used for conducting student elections as well as for polling student opinions on any topic the school chooses and assists to take the administrative burden out of such activities.

System tools supporting student voice

School survey: listening to student views

The *Attitudes to School* survey is an annual student survey for Year 5 to Year 12 students offered by the Department of Education to assist schools in gaining an understanding of students' perceptions and experience of school. Schools use the survey results to plan programs and activities to improve the schooling experience.

In 2007, the student survey will include items such as:

- My teachers listen to what I have to say.
- My teachers try to understand how I learn.
- I feel I belong at this school.
- I feel good about being a student at this school.
- My teachers really want to help me learn.

Experience of this and other surveys suggests that students in Years 5 to 12 are able to realistically generalise in forming an opinion about a group of teachers, in the same way that parents do when they respond to the parent opinion survey and staff do in the staff opinion survey. As the data is not intended for discussion relating to individual teacher performance the fact that it is generalised is not a disadvantage.

Schools use the data in a number of ways, including:

- to monitor levels of student engagement, especially in relation to the effectiveness of middle years projects
- to compare school level data on engagement with statewide benchmarks
- to stimulate discussion within the school community about how to improve engagement
- to assist in the identification of areas for improvement and professional development needs in the school.

The Department is able to aggregate the school data and develop a statewide picture of student engagement, to be used in monitoring the impact of initiatives for the middle years of schooling. Over time it will be possible to discern trends in improvements. Gathering perception data from schools is important if schools are to have a complete picture of their performance.

On receipt of their reports, schools have found it useful for the leadership team to interpret the report, present the findings to the staff for discussion and identification of possible actions and finally discuss both the interpretation and possible actions with students.

Assessment and reporting

In Victoria, implementation of the *Blueprint* (2003) reforms included the development of new curriculum and reporting guidelines to assist schools in deciding on curriculum development, improved teaching methods, assessment and reporting. The Department of Education promotes assessment *of* learning, assessment *for* learning, and assessment *as* learning. Assessment as learning involves students as active participants in their learning by reflecting on and monitoring their progress to inform their future learning goals. The Personal Learning Goals section of the new student report card allows students to document their goals at the beginning of each semester and report on their progress towards achieving those goals at the end of each semester.

To enable student to become active participants in the assessment process, teachers encourage students to reflect on their learning, set and monitor their own learning goals, and with their teachers, develop strategies for working towards achieving them. When this happens, students are empowered as active participants in the assessment process, and assessment is no longer simply something that is ‘done to them’.

Assessment as learning plays an important role in improving student learning outcomes – not only are students actively engaged in the process, but the process also develops the skills that underpin the notion of becoming an independent learner.

The significance of supporting students to develop their own learning goals is reflected in the design of the new student report cards. The Personal Learning Goals section of the report card allows students to document their goals at the beginning of each semester and report on their progress towards achieving those goals at the end of each semester.

In some primary schools teachers are using Student Learning and Improvement tools to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Students are setting their own goals, working on action plans for improvement, tracking progress and reflecting on their learning. Students are reporting a feeling of greater engagement in their learning and a real sense of being a ‘co-partner’ with their teacher in moving their learning forwards.

The Principles of Learning and Teaching

The Principles of Learning and Teaching (PoLT) were developed to support the professional development of teachers and provide advice in areas such as diversity of learning and thinking styles, student-teacher relationships and productive learning experiences. The relationship with student voice can be identified through the following PoLT statement:

A learning environment that promotes independence, interdependence and self-motivation:

- provides opportunities for students to make individual and collaborative decisions about how they will undertake learning tasks
- ensures class discussion is not dominated by the teacher’s voice
- canvasses student opinion

- ensures students are encouraged to be involved in determining the aspects of a particular topic that they wish to cover, and design their own assessment tasks
- ensures not all decisions relating to all projects, research and investigations are made by the teacher.

More information on the *Principles of Learning and Teaching P-12 Unpacked* can be accessed at <<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/blueprint/fs1/polit/unpacked.htm>>.

High Performing Schools Program

Student voice is a key component in the High Performing Schools Program. The program provides a means of driving whole school improvement by establishing a performance and development culture. The program is grounded in innovative collaborative processes involving students, teachers and parents. Student feedback to individual teachers occurs on a regular basis and is used to create an environment which improves the student's sense of belonging and significance.

South Australia

Student Voice/Learners' Partnerships

The Student Voice/Learners' Partnerships project is an initiative of the South Australian Government Social Inclusion Unit, implemented through the Department of Education and Children's Services. It is one of seven initiatives undertaken by the Government under its School Retention Action Plan. The project supports fifteen project schools as districts, teachers and students work together to find effective ways of involving young people in significant decision making and action taking in their schools.

The principles that inform partnerships with learners in site and district planning and decision making include a right to:

- 'voice' that includes the full diversity of learners
- access, by providing multiple strategies, support to facilitate the involvement of diverse learners and ongoing induction of all participants in inclusive decision making
- accreditation, which involves learners identifying issues of concern to them as part of teaching and learning processes, and a right to decision making partnerships
- powerful partnerships that involve a sense of ownership and belonging, ongoing evaluation and improvement of those partnerships, and attention to key elements of participation so that students are empowered.

A major outcome of the project has been the development of a set of case studies outlining the experiences of the project schools, although the final report on the overall effectiveness of the project has not yet been released.

Some individual projects reported in the case studies were: students at Enfield High School (see below) developing their 'voice' to influence curriculum offerings at the school; the establishment of a radio station at Coober Pedy Area School; and the development of a

student action team at John Pirie Secondary School with the aim to involve groups of students in identifying and tackling school and community issues.

Enfield High School

The student voice project at Enfield High School is one example from the Student Voice/Learners' Partnerships project. This project was based on the idea that students learn best when they are enthusiastic about their learning and can communicate that enthusiasm to others. Year 10 students were given the opportunity to build their interests into the curriculum via the Voice IT project, a consultation process designed in partnership with Youth Work students from TAFE, South Australia. The consultation process resulted in students developing projects ranging from computer building, through to catering, to developing a bike maintenance program.

Following the student voice project, Enfield High School staff and Year 11 and 12 students are now exploring how they can map and plan learning so that more students can link their learning, 'their passion and their future aspirations'. The coordinators of the project identified the following positive outcomes from the project.

- There is increased commitment from young people and development of skills and expertise.
- Teachers learned more about their students.
- Learning partnerships outside of the school have developed.
- Students' interests that were previously outside of the curriculum have been accredited and are now a strong part of the curriculum.

According to the coordinators, problems encountered with the project:

mainly centred on the fact that traditional structures of schooling are based on a single teacher being in charge of a class that meets at a set place, at a set time. When teachers work to incorporate students' passion and enthusiasm into their program, they are often working against what other teachers, and even some students, expect. This involves a tremendous amount of commitment and time that may eventually discourage teachers to continue.

New South Wales

Consulting with Student Representatives

The New South Wales Student Representative Council (SRC) is the peak student leadership consultative and decision making forum and represents all secondary students in government schools. The Council consists of 22 members, including two Indigenous student leaders, elected from all regions in New South Wales.

In addition to regular meetings, the Council meets with senior staff of the Department of Education and Training twice a year. As a result students have a say on a wide range of issues.

Senior officers:

- hear about issues that are being raised by students

- learn about the plans and achievements of the NSW SRC
- find ways for staff and students to work together.

A working party of students also organises an annual SRC Conference with regional representatives elected by their peers at inter-school SRC meetings. In 2005, for example, 126 students, 14 supervising staff and approximately 50 departmental staff and interagency visitors from across NSW attended a conference which:

- focused on ways for schools to create harmonious environments
- explored options to enhance community links
- created opportunities for student leaders to enhance personal leadership skills.

Students participated in workshops, had opportunities to hear inspiring keynote speakers and debated recommendations forwarded from school and inter-school SRCs.

Evidence from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training website suggests that students involved in the New South Wales SRC are developing their leadership skills and making links with their local communities and with a variety of state government departments.

Queensland

A Real Voice for Students, Nanango State High School

Nanango State High School began a middle school program in 1999, with a focus on improved pedagogy, cross-subject planning, teacher teams, social support and intellectual rigour. In 2001, the school began their IDEAS journey, working with senior students, staff and community members to articulate a school vision and a school-wide statement of pedagogy.

Building on these foundations, the English Head of Department introduced a new student voice approach to increasing student engagement in their learning with a Year 9 class that was losing focus. Because he had taught the same group the previous year, he already had strong relationships with the students. In Term 2, 2003, the teacher worked with the class to develop a shared understanding of good teaching and learning, and get 'buy-in' from students in planning what they would learn and how they would learn it. These principles followed through for the class in Year 10 in 2004. In 2005, the same approach was instituted with a new Year 9 class.

The approach included three main strategies:

- students devising a statement of good teaching and learning
- students working collaboratively with the teacher to develop units of work
- students developing a statement of responsibilities.

The process began with every student identifying moments when they felt they had really learned something and enjoyed doing so. This led to the development of a list of common

elements of good learning. To give every student a voice, discussions started in small groups, and then consensus was sought through a whole-class discussion. Following this discussion, a small group of students developed a good teaching and learning statement for the class.

The development of the good teaching and learning statement was followed by the development of units of work. Each semester, the teacher asked the class to discuss what they would like to learn about, and what forms their learning might take. A small group of student volunteers then worked with the teacher to suggest classroom activities that they would enjoy and that would enhance student learning. Discussions with students were prefaced by the teacher outlining the requirements of the syllabus and these 'absolutes' were fitted in through the negotiation process.

A general approach for these negotiations was to obtain class consensus, then meet with a smaller volunteer group in lunch hours to plan in more detail. The plans were taken back to the whole class for ratification or modification. The volunteer group met every two to three weeks to plan future activities and evaluate progress. The numbers of students in the volunteer groups varied, but generally equalled about a third of the class. The participating students tended to be the most able and those who found school most challenging, rather than the students in the middle.

The 2003 Year 9 students also developed a statement of student responsibilities that would allow the agreed approach to work in practice and was used as a reference tool for the class throughout the two years of the project.

While neither qualitative nor quantitative data have been gathered at this time, the teacher made the following observations.

- There has been a positive impact on engagement, behaviour and achievement.
- There has been some flow-on effect throughout the school as teachers and students see what is possible when negotiating curriculum and pedagogy.
- The students involved have learned how to work in groups, have become more tolerant, and have developed organisational, writing, IT and interviewing skills.
- Team building, class culture, thinking skills, problem solving, communication skills and social learning have been enhanced.
- Students have been involved in presentations with their teacher at a range of professional development forums for teachers to outline what they did and how it worked.
- It is 'the process' that is important – the students' choices have not been particularly radical.
- The Nanango State High School administration has been supportive of the approach.
- Personal relationships with teachers are crucial for early secondary students.
- Students are keen to be involved in collaborative planning.

- Giving students choice is vital for their engagement with their learning.
- Students like setting goals and having established timelines.

The teacher also identified three challenges encountered during the project:

1. The process takes time.
2. Flexibility is required to respond to student ideas.
3. It can be frightening for teachers to share their power.

Australian Capital Territory

Student Exhibitions – A pilot study in the ACT

In 2001 a Year 9 Student Exhibitions Program was piloted by the ACT Department of Education, Training, Youth and Family Services and evaluated by Brennan et al. (2001). The Exhibitions Program assisted teachers to develop ‘carefully designed, multi-dimensional’ exhibition tasks that were undertaken by student groups. Upon completion of their exhibition tasks, students were assessed by presenting their work and learning to a panel at a ‘Roundtable’ meeting. The Exhibition process required students to develop over a term or semester a portfolio of evidence (including work samples and a reflective journal) on the processes and progress of their learning in response to the set task and to present a selection of evidence of their achievement to a Roundtable (or panel) consisting of teachers, other students and community members. A rubric was designed to assist with the assessment of the students’ work. The rubric had three elements that assisted with structuring the assessment process: ‘student as active learner’, ‘student as reflective learner’ and ‘student as presenter’. Feedback from the Roundtable identified students’ future learning needs and possible directions.

The Roundtable meeting enabled students to clearly describe to an audience the understanding and knowledge that they had acquired through engagement with a significant task over a significant period. Owen (2002) observed that:

The experience of the pilot program indicated the high value many students placed on the dignity they were shown at the Roundtable. (It required) levels of student control and autonomy, the development of a language to talk about their own work and learning journey, and a relationship with adults that was premised on equality. In some cases, the Roundtable was the highlight of the learning experience for students, convincing them of the need to work harder and providing an opportunity for reflection on their strengths and weaknesses as learners more generally.

The Student Exhibitions process provides a way of promoting ‘authentic assessment’ by enabling students to demonstrate what they can do and what they have genuinely achieved. It also changes the role of the student in the learning process. Consequently the ‘school may be required to accommodate a more compelling student voice, greater student agency, (and) higher level participation in democratic decision-making processes that affect their lives at school’ (Owen 2002).

Conclusion

Research indicates that changing societal attitudes and views of young people over several decades has led to the development and refinement of the concept of student voice. Current research is beginning to suggest that student voice, when it involves students having a genuine say in their learning, has served as a catalyst for change in schools. Positive outcomes include: helping to improve teaching and learning; improving teacher-student relationships; increasing student engagement with their learning; and raising student self-esteem and efficacy (Fielding 2001; Mitra 2003, 2004, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter 2000).

Researchers found that students who were consulted felt more respected as individuals and as a body within the school. They also felt that they belonged and they liked being treated in an adult way. Students at risk of disengaging were found in some cases to 'come back on board' as a result of having their opinions heard and acted upon (Rudduck & Flutter 2003).

Mitra (2004) found that student voice activities 'can create meaningful experiences for youth that help to meet fundamental developmental needs, especially for students who otherwise do not find meaning in their school experiences'.

Researchers connected with the projects in Victoria, Queensland, NSW, California, Canada and the UK, all cited in this paper, also identified the development of students' skills, in research, leadership, group work, writing skills and public speaking.

One of the notable aspects of the Manitoba School Improvement project has been the belief that having students shape the questions that need to be asked in their schools and then collect, analyse and present the results provides students with a powerful voice.

Drawing on the research outlined in this report, it is clear that student voice initiatives need the support of the whole school with the whole school culture supporting the processes and follow up around student voice. Research further suggests that a lone teacher in a classroom using this approach may become frustrated and so too might the students if they see no general support for what they have to say, and no opportunity to influence school decisions and decision makers.

The Victorian education system has demonstrated a policy commitment over many years to valuing the views and opinions of students. Schools are now demonstrating innovative ways of capturing the authentic student voice as a means of engaging students and enhancing their educational experiences. In this, they gradually increase the match between our best educational aspirations for students and what happens in their daily experience at school.

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