

# From “student voice” to “youth–adult partnership”

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What does the term “student voice” mean to you? Does it mean listening to students’ opinions? Involving students in decisions about their learning? Giving students equal say in decisions about school management and governance? This commentary analyses and critiques the ways we tend to think about young people’s responsibilities, roles and rights to participate.

I’ve long found the phrase *student voice* problematic. Consider this finding from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research’s (NZCER’s) 2009 National Survey of Secondary Schools: When presented with the statement “there is too much emphasis on ‘student voice’ and similar ideas nowadays”, teachers were almost divided in thirds: 26 percent agreed or strongly agreed; 34 percent were unsure; and 39 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed (Hipkins, 2010, p. 89). Why did these teachers have such divergent opinions? More importantly, how exactly did each teacher interpret the term *student voice*, and what did they imagine “too much emphasis” on student voice might comprise? Given these questions, I have some sympathy with the third of teachers who chose the “unsure” response!

Recently my colleague Rose Hipkins and I have been unpacking some of the different ideas that tend to get lumped together under the rubric of “student voice”. Rose has described it as “a catch-all phrase that appears to be underpinned by at least five different types of pedagogical application, each of them linked to a different body of theory ...” (Hipkins, 2010, p. 86). For example:

- constructivist learning theories, which argue that students actively build their own meanings from their learning experiences, and that teachers need to hear students “voice” their own views on their learning in order for teachers to identify and support next learning steps

- inquiry learning approaches, where the “voice” of students is elicited to identify and pursue questions that interest them and, at best, link meaningfully to their lives beyond school
- goals related to the development of students’ leadership skills by incorporating student “voices” in forums for decision making on various school matters
- psychological theories of personal development, where students are encouraged to express their “voice” in order to increase their self-awareness and ability to regulate their own behaviour and thinking
- goals related to responding to diversity in the classroom, acknowledging the rights of all students to be engaged by and have a voice in their learning, regardless of their different individual starting points, any special learning needs and different “worldviews” associated with the students’ different backgrounds, cultures and experiences.

Looking across these interpretations, it is evident that student voice approaches can be underpinned either by an “improvement” agenda—making teaching and learning better within current ways of thinking about schooling—or a “transformative” agenda—the notion of enlisting young people to help shift the ways schooling is done. In practice, these different interpretations tend to get jumbled together but it is interesting to consider each in relation to the national survey finding: Which one(s) did some teachers think had too much emphasis nowadays?

Although I don't think it's accurate or useful to say that student voice has been overemphasised, I do think we need to find a better way to think and talk about how to involve young people in shaping their educational environments and experiences. In my own research work with young people, I have often struggled to find better alternatives to the term *student voice*. Other authors similarly dislike the term because of the mixture of multiple and often divergent rationales that sit beneath various approaches (Fielding, 2009; Lundy, 2007; Mitra, 2009a). For many of us, the most problematic issue is that "student voice" approaches may not address underlying power differences between young people and adults—particularly in contexts such as schools where adult and youth roles are already tightly framed and the power differentials between adults and young people are deeply embedded. The idea of "listening to students" or "consulting young people" (including in noneducational settings, e.g., local government) is similarly critiqued for its potential to limit young people's involvement to providing a point of view or perspective, with no guarantee that their input will be taken into account or that they will have input into subsequent decisions.

Lately I've become interested in the term *youth–adult partnerships* as an alternative to *student voice* (Bolstad, 2011). Youth–adult partnerships are described "as relationships in which both youth and adults have the potential to contribute to decision-making processes, to learn from one another, and to promote change" (Jones & Perkins, 2004, as cited in Mitra, 2009a, p. 407). What I

like about this concept is that it requires us to reconsider the roles and responsibilities of both young people *and adults* when thinking about how to engage young people's perspectives—including how to address the existing power differentials between the partners.

The idea of youth–adult partnership has a more overtly transformative intention than some interpretations of student voice. "Student voice" can, of course, be a subset of youth–adult partnerships, but the latter term originates in the youth development field, and is strongly anchored in a rights-based framework for child/youth participation derived from United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which stresses "young people's intrinsic rights as autonomous individuals deserving of equality, choice, respect, and consideration" (Bragg, 2007, p. 12). Under Article 12 of the UNCRC, children have the right to express opinions and have their views taken into account in any matter impacting on their wellbeing. This view of children "as 'social actors' who can form and express opinions, participate in decision-making processes and influence solutions" sits alongside a more familiar view of children as objects of concern, who are in need of protection and provision (Bragg, 2007, p. 11), a view that is perhaps more common within educational thinking.

While youth–adult partnership approaches encourage us to tackle the common power differentials that exist between adults and young people, it is important to state that this doesn't necessarily mean that adults and children/youth can or should have *equal* roles or

**TABLE 1** COMPARISON BETWEEN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT/YOUTH–ADULT PARTNERSHIP APPROACHES AND CONVENTIONAL SCHOOL CULTURE

	<b>Youth development/youth–adult partnership approaches</b>	<b>Conventional "school culture"</b>
<b>Group size and ratio of adults to youth</b>	Mitra (2009a, 2009b) suggests the ideal size is 10–15 youth working with one or two (or more) adults.	One adult teacher typically works with a class of 30 students.
<b>Relationships</b>	Adults and young people are partners, with different expertises. All partners are not "equal" as in identical, but everyone has something to contribute.	Teacher is the authority; students are directed by the teacher.
<b>Youth culture/youth issues</b>	Viewed as a fundamental component of the youth–adult partnership—and the adults need to be interested in and sensitive to youth culture and youth issues and value these as resources for the joint work of the group.	At best, youth culture and youth issues are integrated into curriculum and teaching in order to make learning relevant and engaging for students.  At worst, youth culture and youth issues are seen as interfering with the "real work" of teaching and learning the curriculum.
<b>Core purpose</b>	Developing students' capabilities, knowledge and experience in the context of a project where students are leaders and change makers (addressing problems within their schools, or addressing the challenge of getting "student voice" into educational decision making, or addressing some other social justice or community or youth-related challenge).	Teaching students through the curriculum.

responsibilities. Lundy (2007, p. 929) suggests that adult resistance to approaches that would enable young people to fully enjoy their rights to participation (for example, as expressed in UNCRC) may stem from one of three types of concerns:

- scepticism about children's capacity to have meaningful input into decision making
- concern that giving children more control will undermine authority and destabilise the school environment
- concerns that it will require too much effort that would be better spent on education itself.

However, adults' conscious or subconscious views are not the only obstacles. Many structures and practices that define typical school culture are simply not conducive to youth–adult partnership thinking. Some examples of the tensions between youth-development approaches and power structures and practices conventionally at play in schools are briefly summarised in Table 1.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the literature on youth–adult partnerships is that genuine and productive partnerships are unlikely to be achieved without transforming those aspects of school culture that work against young people's abilities to genuinely participate. I am interested in how a shift away from the discourse of “student voice” in favour of the discourse of “youth–adult partnership” might help all of us with an interest in education to have richer and more provocative discussions about young people's rights, responsibilities and roles in co-constructing their educational experiences. I am sure that there are already good examples of youth–adult partnerships occurring in some schools (for example, restorative justice approaches). What conditions might allow youth–adult partnership ways of thinking to play out further in schools? What might these partnerships look like (including for students at different year levels) and what role might “intermediary organisations” (Mitra, 2009b), including those with knowledge and expertise in the domain of youth development, play in supporting these approaches? What do you think?

## References

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