

“I think it’s important we get a say”: KidsMatter and student voice

What is student voice?

Student voice allows students to have a say about what goes on at their school and be active participants in the school community¹. Student voice helps students to participate in and contribute to a number of processes at school, including:

- decision making in a variety of areas like curriculum planning and school community values
- forming a student-led Action Team to research and develop strategies to improve the school community
- providing feedback about teaching and learning at the school.

In practice, student participation in the school community can happen across five levels, ranging from basic to high level and from adult led to student led². Generally, the higher the level of student participation, the more meaningful it is to students. The table below gives examples of student voice at each level of involvement.

Why is it important for students to have a voice at school?

Children spend a lot of time at school. After the family, school has the most significant influence on child development, so making students’ time at school enjoyable and worthwhile supports their mental health and wellbeing. Part of this process involves supporting students to be active contributors to their own learning. The sense of belonging, positive relationships and improved self-esteem achieved when children are active contributors in their school community are significant protective factors that support their mental health and wellbeing now and in the future.

While listening to student voice is important, research shows that the benefits for students don’t come from just hearing their own voices; it’s more about how other people (students, teachers, schools) respond to students’ voices and work with them to make ideas come to life. In other words, the opportunities for students to participate in shaping their experiences at school must be real rather than simulated³.

Student led	Level 5	Decision making is shared by adults. Decision making about a variety of issues (ie not just student concerns) is initiated by students and they share the process with adults.
	Level 4	Decision making is led, directed and centred on students. Students start and lead decision making about student concerns. Adults play only a supportive role.
Adult led	Level 3	Decision making is shared by students. Decision making is started by adults, but students participate in the process.
	Level 2	Decision making is informed by students. Students give information or opinions that are used in the decision making process.
	Level 1	Decision making includes input from students. Students are given a specific role in the decision making process and told how and why they are involved.

What are some of the barriers to change?

Even though many schools would like to incorporate the principles of student voice into the school community, the process isn't always easy. Sometimes it isn't possible to bring students' ideas to life because of restrictions on time or other resources (eg funding). Students are also less likely to be involved in some higher level decisions (eg budget allocation). Looking at ways to incorporate student voice into the school community can seem like a very large task, especially if your school is only at the very beginning of the process. A good way to start seeking and using student voice at your school is to start with one of the lower levels of student involvement and work your way up to the higher levels. For example, you might like to look at the areas in which students currently have input and identify where there might be opportunities for students to give their opinions or information which can drive decision making. Also keep in mind that your school doesn't need to involve students in every decision made at the school in order to hear and honour student voice.

How does KidsMatter Primary help schools to hear and honour student voice?

The KidsMatter Primary framework recognises the importance of student voice through one of its Guiding Principles.

KidsMatter Primary Guiding Principle 6: Children need to be active participants

Ongoing efforts at a whole-school level are required to ensure that all community members feel included and able to participate actively in day-to-day school life. This includes building a school culture in which student voice has a place. This principle recognises that supporting students to be engaged contributors to healthy and active communities is important. Students who experience a sense of belonging and supportive relationships with teachers and classmates are more motivated to participate actively in the life of the classroom.

The four components of KidsMatter Primary also help schools to hear and honour student voice in the entire school community

Component 1: Positive school community

Helps schools to focus on building a culture where every contribution is valued and everyone feels included. It requires a whole-school approach, where contributions from students are valued in the classroom, philosophy of the school and broader school community.

Component 2: Social and emotional learning for students

Focuses on teaching students social and emotional skills to build the confidence they need to become active participants in the school community. The importance of relationships is also emphasised so that student voice is supported by a culture of positive relationships within the entire school community.

Component 3: Working with parents and carers

Helps to strengthen the positive relationships that support student voice by encouraging schools to build positive working relationships with parents and carers.

Component 4: Helping children with mental health difficulties

Helps schools to support children who may need extra support. By supporting children's mental health, schools help students to use their voice and be active participants in the school community, as well as seek help if required.

What are you doing at your school?

There are no set rules about how to incorporate student voice in day-to-day activities at your school. You might already be doing activities to involve students in decision making or you might like to think of additional ways that you can involve them. Try to keep in mind that seeking student voice and involving students in decision making at your school isn't something extra you need to do as ideally students will automatically be involved in some way. You might like to use the questions below to guide your reflections about student voice.

- What does student voice look like at our school?
- When students have ideas or want to have a say about something at the school, how do they tell the school community?
- What would you like student voice to look like at your school? In which areas would you like to involve students? (eg planning and decision making) What would you need to set up at the school for this to happen? (eg student leadership teams)
- What does student voice look like to school staff?
- How does your school handle a situation where it is not possible to do what students have requested?

"If you got your say, then you'd feel like they're letting you in, and you feel like you're meant to be here."

Student, Hastings Primary School

Other resources

- Connect, a free bimonthly magazine edited by Roger Holdsworth about student voice and supporting student participation:
www.asprinworld.com/connect
- Examining the Meaning of Student Involvement: The Ladder of Student Involvement in School by Adam Fletcher, which contains additional information about the levels of student voice and how to go about assessing student voice at your school:
www.soundout.org/ladder.html
- Student Voice, an online resource to help students, teachers and parents share and reflect on the ways in which young people are empowered to influence their own learning:
www.studentvoice.aitsl.edu.au

Some videos on this site that might be of particular interest to primary schools are:

- Peer teaching:
www.studentvoice.aitsl.edu.au/videos/385
- Curriculum planning:
www.studentvoice.aitsl.edu.au/videos/382
- Student engagement and inquiry-based learning:
www.studentvoice.aitsl.edu.au/videos/378

References

1. Manefield, J., Collins, R., Moore, J., Mahar, S., & Warne, C. (2007). Student voice: A historical perspective and new directions. East Melbourne: State of Victoria.
2. Fletcher, A. (2005). Meaningful student involvement guide to students as partners in school change. Seattle: Human Links Foundation. Retrieved from: www.soundout.org/ladder.html
3. Holdsworth, R. (2012). Student voice: Patterns of partnership and the demands of deep democracy. Connect Newsletter, 197, 10-15.



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