

How to use student voice for assessment and inquiry



School resources

Using student voice for assessment and inquiry

'Student voice' is the intentional collection of students' thinking and feedback on their learning, and the use of these voices to inform and improve teaching, learning, and school-wide decision making. Collecting student voice should not be regarded as an additional process or requirement – rather, it is an essential source of data that can and should be used to guide next learning steps for students and decisions about content and approaches by teachers and leaders. These decisions might be based in individual classrooms or at a school-wide level, where they contribute to changes in leadership, systems, and structures that affect teachers and students across and beyond the whole school.

Why use student voice?

Collecting and using student voice as part of school-wide practices to inform day-to-day teaching as well as ongoing cycles of inquiry can help schools to sustain effective practice and learning. It allows teachers to identify and measure gaps between what has been taught and what has been learnt and, when used as formative assessment data, it can inform shifts in teaching to address immediate learning needs. It can also provide valuable information about how students find the school and classroom environment, and is a valuable source of data on students' wellbeing.

The collection and use of student voice helps to address deficit thinking in a number of ways, because it helps teachers to determine and build from what students can do rather than what they cannot do. The use of student voice also builds student engagement and agency as it is a key mechanism through which students develop assessment capability and become active participants in their learning. It can support the development of a student's sense of responsibility and ownership over their learning by connecting to what is real and important to them.

How to collect student voice

In addition to the conversations that occur in classrooms on a daily basis, some of the most common ways to collect rich, useful student voice data are interviews, focus groups and surveys. It is important to note that an informal interview with a student will typically provide better quality data than a survey which relies on a student's comprehension – their ability to accurately interpret questions – and their ability to express themselves in writing. Student reflections and written work may also serve as forms of student voice data. Schools should also remember that collection and use of student voice needs to be age appropriate, so practices and procedures should look different at different year levels.

How student voice can be used

Student voice is routinely used by individual teachers as an information source in their planning because it informs teaching and learning by identifying issues with learning programmes and informing curriculum changes. Student voice can also inform school-wide improvement and professional learning, and it can even inform teacher appraisals and help teachers to identify professional development goals. In addition to informing teacher and school-wide planning, student voice can also be used to develop students' own learning and assessment capability, particularly in relation to using assessment data to co-construct learning intentions, using progressions to discuss their learning and using assessment tools.

Student voice and whānau engagement are part of the same picture, so that lifting one can also lift the other. Making student voice more visible in tools such as student reports and portfolios helps to involve parents and whānau. Whānau voice should also be captured throughout the year to evaluate the effectiveness of planning processes and to support whānau to take an active role in supporting learning at school and home.

How to build a strong culture of using student voice in schools

Effective implementation of student voice requires a transparent, school-wide, planned and strategic approach to ensure that students experience consistent practices and expectations across the school. This will also enable teachers to have a clear understanding around the need for student voice and how best to utilise it to develop their own teaching practice.

Student voice should be a regular item on the agenda for staff meetings so that staff can develop a common understanding of student voice, a shared language of learning and a shared vision of strategic direction. It will take time to build shared understanding across staff of student voice and how it can be used to enhance teaching and learning, but this is needed before staff can begin to examine their own practice and begin to interpret student voice data and consider the implications of the data for their teaching. Building a shared understanding through professional discussion also provides learning opportunities and can identify needs and issues not previously considered.

Student voice is also a powerful mechanism through which schools can take control of their teacher professional development by ensuring development is guided by what students are saying will make a difference to their learning. Student voice should ultimately be understood as an evidence source that informs cycles of reflective practice and deliberate acts of teaching. Goals, strategies and actions related to student voice need to be embedded within schools' professional learning programme, although teachers will be at different levels of readiness, willingness and ability regarding student voice and there is a need to be responsive to these differences. Building on existing practices by identifying and communicating where student voice is already part of routine practice will ensure that it is not perceived as something 'new' or 'additional', and demonstrates that student voice is a source of assessment data already used in the school to accelerate student progress.

One of the things that may make embedding the use of student voice in teacher practice and school systems difficult is the lack of clarity and examples of what effective practice around the use of student voice looks like. With a range of teacher assessment capabilities and understanding of how student voice enables meaningful learning, success in implementing student voice practices requires consistency of practice across the school. It must be the genuine use of voice, not just its collection. Implementing student voice practices will also require time and resourcing to develop digital technology systems to facilitate school-wide collection, storage and use of student voice data, and to upskill staff to use the systems effectively.

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In 2014, the Cognition Education Trust (CET) funded Whakatupuhia te reo, Whakatupuhia te tamaiti, a project investigating how student voice could be used to influence classroom and school wide decision making that accelerates student progress. One Hamilton and three Auckland primary schools took part in the project and their key learnings were captured as individual case studies and used to develop a student voice assessment tool. This resource has been developed from this project.