

Student Voice

Diana Tregoweth

Owairaka District School

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Executive Summary

During our last school ERO review, student voice was discussed as an area that we could extend. Our school had recently gained the Silver Award for Enviroschools and to gain the Gold Award we needed to involve our students at a higher level than we were currently achieving. As a result, I decided to visit schools that were performing well, particularly Enviroschools, and inquire what they were doing with regard to promoting student voice. I was also very interested in observing projects schools had implemented, consistent with the principles of Enviroschools.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time visiting schools in Christchurch, Wellington, Hamilton and Auckland. I also visited schools in Melbourne, Canberra and North Queensland. I was grateful to be invited to the Enviroschool hui in Rotorua; attended by Enviroschool facilitators from throughout New Zealand. I had the opportunity to delve into the newly released Enviroschools kit and discuss educational matters with a variety of facilitators. These passionate people are working very hard to support schools. Sadly, not long after this hui, the Government announced that it was halting their funding to Enviroschools in favour of promoting literacy and numeracy. This is an unfortunate

development. From all that I viewed in schools, literacy and numeracy are fully integrated into Enviroschool programmes along with other learning areas and key competencies. Enviroschool philosophy and practice fits perfectly with *The New Zealand Curriculum* and should be supported. Student voice is an important facet of the Enviroschool programme. It was a pleasure to be shown around schools by such confident, articulate students. I found that student voice was more evident where Enviroschool philosophy was embedded in a school.

Purpose and Rationale

To investigate the effect of “student voice” in high performing schools.

- How do primary schools use student voice to develop students into confident, connected, actively involved life long learners?
- How is student voice used in schools engaged in the Enviroschool programme?
- How is student voice used to promote effective learning in multi cultural schools?

I particularly focused on the use of student voice in schools involved in the Enviroschool programme as this is a feature of the programme and something that we are wishing to promote in our school. I was interested to gain ideas for successful ways of involving the students in their learning.

Activities Undertaken (Methodology)

Enviroschool facilitators suggested a variety of schools to visit. Attending the Enviroschool hui was very useful for me as I gained a greater understanding of the whole Enviroschool programme.

I was also interested in the *Kitchen Garden* programme initiated by Stephanie Alexander in Australia. I visited a school in Canberra that had begun to implement this programme. Kitchen Garden is currently being trialled in three schools in Auckland. I also visited a high performing enviro oriented school in North Queensland and gained further insights of how to involve students in Enviroschool programmes.

During my sabbatical period I visited 19 schools, mainly Enviroschools. I visited other schools that were not Enviroschools – one of these was a high performing decile 1 school and another school was using *Powerful Learning* as their focus for teaching and learning. I also visited a school to look at the work that they do on student-led conferences.

I used some of my time to read articles on student voice as well as taking time to catch up on other professional reading.

Findings

Student voice falls naturally out of Enviroschool programmes. Students often have opportunities to form ideas and design an action plan. They are then able to implement these ideas in the school. Children I spoke to were all very passionate about what they were doing and they were very keen to be involved in decision-making. In many instances, the older students were buddied with junior students. One school had a student council where older students supported younger student class representatives during class meetings.

Students enjoyed making a difference and being able to take part in the projects. A number of schools also fully involved their parents and members of the community.

With the new Enviroschool thrust, a school reflection held with students, staff and parent representatives along with an Enviroschool facilitator, schools reflect on a rubric that covers the areas of focus and decide what it has achieved and what areas they need to emphasise. One of the schools I visited in Wellington had recently completed this process. The students were very positive about the reflection process and were very sure of the direction their school needed to take. By speaking to these students I was able to work towards our own school reflection process.

I was very impressed with the student-led conferences that I observed students and teachers preparing for. I witnessed older students practising with Year 1 students for upcoming conferences.

Many schools complete regular surveys with their students by asking questions on a wide variety of topics. There were a variety of ways that surveys were done including questioning about particular topics. For example one survey looked at how children learnt best and asked a series of questions on this topic. The survey results were shared with the staff and followed up on. Staff were also surveyed on how they learned best. Another school surveyed the students on what the school vision meant to them. In surveying the students, one school videos interviews of randomly chosen children from each class. These videos are sometimes played back to the teachers and reflected upon. Other schools questioned children about environmental issues in the school.

I found that schools that had been involved in an *Assessment to Learn* initiative used student voice well. Student voice was fully integrated into the programmes in these schools. There was a distinct focus on staff working with children and listening to their views. For example, teachers work with children to develop success criteria for lessons. From these criteria, students are able to set personal and group goals and self assess.

How do primary schools use student voice to develop students into confident, connected and actively involved life long learners?

Where student voice is encouraged, students develop their confidence because they have a feeling of empowerment. Their oral skills develop to a high degree - to the point where students are confident to contact adults about materials, interview architects, builders, caretakers and make a real contribution to projects happening within the schools. Their research skills are well developed through questioning, and use of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) and library skills.

Students often use inquiry processes to research, investigate, and develop action plans. For example, in order to design a fitness trail for the school a class researched and visited other trails. From these investigations, they designed and presented their idea to the Board of Trustees.

As a result of Enviro-school programmes students are able to: be more divergent in their thinking; learn life skills; and make good decisions.

Some schools have a concerted focus on encouraging students to contribute such as service to others, and to the environment.

Where student voice is encouraged, students are able to articulate stages of their learning and next steps. As a result of this process, students develop a deep knowledge of themselves as learners. Student voice entails students being much more engaged with their learning through having opportunities to apply their knowledge in authentic ways. It is important to educate teachers about the positive impacts that student voice has on learning. Teachers can be defensive when introduced to student voice due to the traditional control they have over teaching and learning.

The Primary Enterprise Programme, an initiative that our school began this year, is an excellent example of how student voice can be acknowledged and affirmed. The programme requires children to design, create and market products to sell. It is student driven and promotes children to become confident, connected, and actively involved lifelong learners. I observed in an Enviro-school the programme extended to a 'green' market day where children sold produce and recycled products. The funds raised have been used to support some of the school's enviro projects.

How is student voice used in schools engaged in the Enviro-school programme?

Many schools operate student councils with representatives from each class in the school. Use of student voice has developed through time. Initially it is important to get the teachers on board and to then scaffold the children so that the teacher and the students contribute. Children can be involved at all levels and where student voice has been encouraged students are involved in school plans, plans for projects, on interview panels and involved in school Enviro groups along with adults such as the caretaker, principal, D.P. Students present at staff meetings and at Board of Trustee meetings. One school's Enviro team had flown to Wellington to do a presentation.

If students' ideas are listened to and the school follows up with their ideas the students' confidence increases and further ideas may be developed.

How is student voice used to promote effective learning in multi cultural schools?

From what I viewed there was not a great difference with anything that multi cultural schools were doing to promote student voice. In some schools teachers needed to do more scaffolding and modelling to promote ideas with the students. I took a number of photos and compiled a scrapbook and photo album for the students and teachers to view when making decisions on EnviroSchool projects for our school. This has already proved very valuable.

Hearing from the students

In discussion with students in different EnviroSchools regarding student voice, they reported that teachers listened to their ideas about what they wanted to learn. The children identified many examples of ideas that had been listened to. They felt that being given a voice helped them with their learning, taught them how to look after the earth, and how to respect the environment.

Questions to encourage student voice

New Zealand Curriculum online has excellent examples of student voice and some interesting readings. The questions below offered me a good place to start to find out what the children were thinking. I interviewed children at my school about teaching and learning.

[New Zealand Curriculum Online – Student views.](#)

Older students were asked:

- What helps you learn?
- What advice would you give to teachers?
- What makes a good teacher?
- When your schoolwork gets hard, what do you do?
- Who do you ask?
- Do you feel able to ask your teacher or your friends questions?
- What do you do if they can't help you?

Younger students were asked:

- Do you like learning new things?
- How do you learn new things?
- What's your teacher like?
- What does your teacher do with you in the classroom?

- If you don't know how to do something, what do you do next?
- Do you ask your teacher questions?

In our school's student surveys we asked what students liked about their teacher. Students identified key teacher strengths through this process.

Implications

As a result of my sabbatical I have collected a number of ideas, compiled a scrapbook to share with students, staff and other colleagues and reflected on what we have been doing in our school with regard to student voice and our Enviroschools programme.

Our school will develop cultural gardens and a school pepeha. We will also ensure that each class takes on a project identified on the school vision map and work collaboratively to achieve these initiatives during 2010.

We will continue the Primary Enterprise Programme and survey students further about their ideas on learning programmes, teaching, health and safety in the school and the environment.

Our school will take part in an AToL (Assessment to Learn) contract during 2010 and 2011.

These initiatives will support the increasing use of student voice to promote student learning.

Conclusion

The sabbatical has allowed me to share ideas about student voice with staff and the board. Already, staff have made some positive changes to their practice. They are listening more to students and using their views to inform their planning. I am so pleased to have had the opportunity to learn more about student voice from schools and enthusiastic educators that I have engaged with.