

How schools are giving more ownership to students in the learning process.

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Acknowledgements

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Summary

There is a wide variety of interpretation between schools as to what they are doing to promote student voice and the methods that they are using. Below I have summarized the methods I encountered from my school visits.

Purpose

I wanted to find out if student voice was becoming increasingly important to children's learning. The students ability to be able to articulate their learning, to say what they know, what they need to know and how they are going to work towards this in order for new learning to take place. I hoped to be able to see student voice have an impact on teachers thinking and enable them to inquire more into their practice.

Rationale and Background

There are a multitude of resources and publications about the benefits of involving students more in their education, written from both overseas and in New Zealand. All have their own body of research.

Our revised New Zealand Curriculum recognizes the need for students to become "confident, connected and actively involved life long learners."

The National Standards acknowledges the importance of students learning to learn.

The term *student voice* has been interpreted widely and has had different meanings and degrees to which schools are actively involved in promoting it.

For the purpose of my study I have defined it as "the way students come to play a more active role in their own learning. "

How then are schools empowering students to take control of their own learning, and how do teachers help them to gain the language to communicate about their own learning so that it translates into lifelong learning skills.

Research by Dianne Smardon (2007) found that interviewing students and recording their responses over time gave a rich insight into how children were able to communicate what they knew about their learning and learning processes. My time frame was too short for this and my observations are based on quite short visits to classrooms and schools over a 5 week time frame. Beyond the scope of my study but of interest to me was the difference that encouraging student voice has for Maori students. Research (ministry) shows student voice reflects our identity and comes from a person's experiences, ideals and knowledge. It allows students to share who they are, what they believe in and why they believe what they do, with others. Student voice is promoted in Ka Hikitia and Maori Education strategies.

Activities undertaken

I visited a selection of primary schools (mainly middle sized to small, rural to city). Some had been part of the *Assess to learn* (AToL) project.

I asked the staff (including Principals) how they are giving more ownership to their pupils using student voice. I observed in classrooms and looked for evidence around the schools.

I talked to a selection of students about their learning.

Findings

There was a wide range of diversity and difference in focus within each school I visited. No school said that student voice was not a part of their school. Also no school had student voice as their main target. There was a range of feedback.

Principals were all promoting voice within their schools to varying degrees. Wide variance between classes/teachers within a school was also noted. Some classes I saw lots of evidence but did not get the feedback from students and in others the visual impact on walls was less but the students were more vocal.

I talked with students. Junior children were able to talk about their learning just as much as the older Year 6 children. I did not spend time with years 7 & 8 children. I applied the terms used by John West-Burnham to the children's answers to my questions. Many statements would have been classified as *shallow* and relied on memorization, information and replication. A few children I spoke to showed reflection, knowledge and understanding (*deep*). To get responses at the *profound* level (intuition, wisdom and meaning) I would have needed to have spent more time with teachers in their classrooms and to build up a rapport with the children.

Ownerships was being given in the following ways:

Principals talked about:

- Reporting to parents and 3 way conferences
- Inquiry learning
- Discovery learning
- Student run assemblies
- Celebration of success
- Technology
- SOLO taxonomy
- Leadership
- Gifted and talented programmes

Teachers talked about:

- Learning intentions/WALTs
- Discovery Learning
- Classroom and school responsibilities
- Elective programmes
- Leadership
- Classroom/School Blogs
- Diaries
- School productions
- Self management
- ICT opportunities

Students talked about:

- Learning intentions
- Next steps
- What they knew about their learning.
- What they liked about their school
- How they contributed to the learning process

- Goal setting

Assessment for Learning (AToL)

I approached Dianne Smardon from the University of Waikato to suggest schools that had supported her research project. I reviewed my readings from a year professional development AToL contract that I had been part run by Massey University advisers. The work by Black & William (1998) first introduced in 1998 is now reflected more strongly in our revised 2007 New Zealand Curriculum.

Several schools had WALT's (*We are learning to..*) displayed on walls, these were evident in children's books and in teacher planning/modeling books. Some classes had evidence around the walls for the casual visitor and some didn't. Children in WALT classes were usually able to show/point/talk about what they were learning in relation to the learning intention. Without a WALT in evidence I was unable to substantiate what children were explaining in other classes. Formative assessment techniques, as written about by Shirley Clarke (2005), were generally still very much in evidence.

Discovery learning

This was observed in the junior area of two schools. Both schools had very experienced and motivated teachers running their programmes. Each was developing student voice by ways of allowing the children choice and quality sharing.

One school related the discovery time to a school goal, technology project and the weekly alphabet letter. A wide variety of activities were set out, parents were invited to help out and the children chose to do one or as many activities as they wished over a period of 1 1/4 hours. A sharing time was held at the end. Thorough planning was based on *Discovery Time* Brenda Martin & Gay Hay (2008).

Another school had a topic with a range of activities ranging from science/technology to art & crafts. The teacher played a major role as the children were challenged by questions about what they were doing, new vocabulary was introduced and at the end a shared story was written as to what was discovered about the topic.

Inquiry

Several schools reported that inquiry learning was the way they involved the children in their curriculum.

Gwen Gawith's (1983) Action research approach and Lane Clarke (2009) *Where Assessment meets Thinking* and *Where Thinking and learning Meet* were being used to assist children to become more involved and informed about their learning progress.

Teacher inquiry and self reflection were also spoken about to assist with identifying student voice. The inquiry was into teachers own practice and what they could do differently to improve.

SOLO

In schools who have opted to follow the SOLO, (Structured overview of Learning outcomes), taxonomy (after Biggs & Collis (1982) both teachers and children were able to talk about their learning. Usually this was a school focus and the teachers had professional development from *Hooked on Thining* – Pam Hook & Julie Mills (2004). The teachers and children had a common language, tools and understanding. Classrooms reflected this focus on the walls and in the children's verbal and nonverbal communication.

Values/Key competencies

Most schools were using the key competencies and their school values to give children a way of communicating what their school stood for. A slogan or acrostic was used by most schools visited. In one school these values were evident throughout the school by what the teachers taught, in their planning, at their assembly and being communicated to the children. The values were part of the school climate. The children were articulate about what their school stood for.

In other schools values and key competencies were evident on the walls, display areas and in publications.

Some schools were using Dianne Pardoe's *Towards Successful Learning* to help the children to talk about what successful learners are and what they do. This visual and colour coded approach was used to tie in teacher appraisal and goals, as well as classroom and individual goals.

Goal Setting

All school used goal setting to various degrees and saw this as a way to involve children in the learning process. This tended to be more oral at the junior end of the school.

Implications

The children reported, and I observed from my small sample, that they believed they had some control over their learning and progression. In some schools children talked easily about their learning, school was for learning and they knew why and the children enjoyed being able to be part of this process. The children reported that behaviour problems were less of an issue because they were in charge of their own learning. Many children were taking responsibility for their learning, they knew their next step and could set achievable goals. The children had ways to learn as opposed to remembering. Teachers appeared less stressed, although the need to have quality assessment, as opposed to oral interactions was sometimes cited as a reason for not doing more. Maori children were reportedly more hooked in to learning when they could feel they had some control over their learning process and progress.

Conclusions

Having time to listen and talk with children about their learning was a wonderful opportunity. I had read about there being just as much variation *within* schools as *between* schools and saw some evidence of this for myself.

The diversity in the interpretation of the curriculum and priorities placed for each school showed that schools were working to meet their communities and children's needs.

Student voice was in all the schools I visited to different degrees. It was a pleasure to talk with the students and where possible the teachers and principals to hear them talk about their learning journey. I have a clear idea of the direction I would like for my school and some wonderful pointers on how to get started. Thank you to everyone who shared with me.

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