The Power of Student Voice

ASB/APPA Travelling Fellowship-Term 2, 2013

Maree Bathurst
Principal
Albany Primary School

Executive Summary

Introduction

The concept of student voice is multi-faceted. My initial investigation was focused on identifying the "power of student voice" in relation to the learning voice, ethnic and cultural voice, relationship and possible impact on teacher development. An overarching question was also to identify the similarities and differences between teaching and learning in New Zealand schools to that of other internationally acclaimed education systems.

The sabbatical allowed me the luxury of time away from the demands of leading my school to read and research relevant literature and to meet with principals, teachers and educationalists. I visited schools in New Zealand, England, Scotland, Ireland, Norway and Sweden.

It is not until you stand back, reflect and compare our education system with others that you are able to appreciate the legacy of our inspirational leaders, educationalists and researchers that has led to our unique education system. Perhaps it is our geographical isolation, our bi and multicultural history, and / or our newness as a nation still developing our identity that has led us to have such a rich and innovative education system?

Findings and Reflections

"When teachers seek, or at least are open to feedback for students as to what students know, what they understand, where they make errors, when they have misconceptions, when they are not engaged - then teaching and learning can be synchronised and powerful." John Hattie

As frequently occurs in research it is not until you actually dip your feet in the water that you appreciate how vast and deep the lake really is. Through my literature review as well as discussions with educationalists I realised that my naïve wonderings about the power of student voice were merely a "whispering in the wind." The voice is but a representation of a multitude of concepts.

To understand the dimensions of student voice I categorised my original inquiry questions into learning, democratic and ethnic voice, linking them to the associated concepts.

The Learning Voice became the main focus of my inquiry as in visiting some classrooms the total silence of student voice was indicative of the lack of teacher awareness of why this would even be important. Individual factors supporting the learning voice such as locus of control, participative pedagogy and co-creation of the learning voice, have no real value if they stand alone. **The key to success is when all factors are linked through an inter-connected web that also includes the context of teacher student relationship, classroom culture, and whole school environment**. This statement may sound simplistic but actually represents a number of critical elements which make the difference between low level learning and / or super charged high levels of engagement, learning and achievement.

Student voice is a mechanism to identify and monitor engagement but the significance of the child's feedback is also **what and** how the student is learning and progressing. From my observations New Zealand schools appear to be leading the way in terms of the importance of this focus.

The concept of **student agency** transforms the notion of student voice to a completely different level. Agency invokes action, responsibility, mutual engagement and respect. The student is a "learning agent" whose self-efficacy makes the difference to their learning. In other words the teacher may have set the culture for learning but the student needs to be an active participant for engagement and deep learning to occur.

New Zealand research has gained an international reputation through the work of inspirational professionals such as Graham Nuttal, Jane Gilbert, Viviane Robinson, John Hattie, Helen Timperley, Michael Absolum, Graeme Aitken and Russell Bishop to name but a few. Each of these researchers identify different aspects of the changes teachers have had to make as educators, but more importantly why these aspects have made such a powerful difference to the way we teach in relation to improved student learning and achievement.

There are also a number of links, documents, and practices in our education system that support the implicit value of student voice and agency e.g. New Zealand Curriculum, Teacher registration criteria, Ministry of Education professional development programmes, as well as school and cluster based initiatives.

A nation's educational success can never be prescribed as a magic formula or a silver bullet. In my limited observations of other countries we have all the ingredients but need to ensure we have the recipe perfected; research, knowledge, creative and positive teachers and leaders who really want to make a difference. Our challenge is to regain our international achievement status through quality professional development, resourcing and a genuine collaboration with our Ministry of Education to achieve this together.

Recommendations

The number of schools and countries I visited provided some limitations for my recommendations and associated implications. My personal reflections invite your challenge and debate.

- The New Zealand Curriculum is a treasure (taonga) which we must value. The key competencies identify student agency - students understanding they are responsible for their own learning. Having flexibility for delivery of authentic learning contexts promotes teacher and student engagement. The principles reflect our nation's history and aspirations.

- Parents need to have greater understanding of the critical role they play in their child's success. Learning is not "delivered or focussed simply on knowledge" but is about the student learning how to learn. How do we encourage our communities to value the importance of student responsibility for their own learning? That the dispositions of persistence, risk taking, and resilience are valuable "lifelong" lessons.

- Learning Voice shows evidence of a high quality teaching practice in many New Zealand classrooms. How do we capture the complex interaction of teaching and learning in this area to not only share with each other? We need to keep the spirit of collaboration not competition between schools. Professional learning through cluster initiatives supports this as teachers gain greatest value from learning from each other.

- Schools are using inquiry based models and most schools are using data effectively for teachers to self-assess value added. However unless engagement and relationships are truly valued learning is restricted. Direct student voice in terms of student feedback to teachers is a powerful means for teacher reflection. Feedback could include questions around quality of relationships, teacher effectiveness in terms of organisation or clarity of instruction, child's perception of teachers' expectations. Some countries are using student surveys as an integral part of their teacher development. There were positive results and shifts in teacher practice when there was a school culture that reflected teachers as professionals, self - motivated inquirers and not used in any form of punitive or comparative model.

- The research conducted by New Zealanders around effective teaching is highly regarded internationally. As leaders how do we convert such valuable research (such as John Hattie's Visible Learning) into our classrooms so that we are teaching smarter not harder? Our challenge as leaders is to share this knowledge with our students, teachers and communities for what **really** makes a difference in teaching and learning.

- We encourage smart teaching but how are we modelling smart leadership? My observation is that New Zealand principals are asked to do **SO MUCH** more than our international colleagues as we continue to focus on instructional leadership. We need resourcing, time and support if we are to continue to grow our leadership capacity.

- If we have only ever taught in New Zealand we may not recognise teaching practices that we do intuitively (e.g., flexi or micro teaching, personalised and differentiated teaching). These practices are considered innovative compared to more traditional or formal education systems. We have a rich educational legacy for a creative, holistic and student centred education system but how do we ensure we never lose sight of what it is that makes our education system so unique? We were once acclaimed internationally for such innovations as reading recovery. The challenge remains to once again share innovative practice and research internationally.

- We need to remain open to what we can continue to learn from other successful international education systems. International bench marks are useful for comparison of benchmarks and trends however they provide a limited picture. There are many other factors that underpin these test scores including cultural values and respect for education, equity, poverty and diversity.

- The "Asian Tiger" challenges. We cannot be complacent - are we doing enough to truly value education in terms of the global nature of New Zealand place in the world and our current students' future life and career options?

Mā te rongo, ka mōhio; Mā te mōhio, ka mārama; Mā te mārama, ka mātau; Mā te mātau, ka ora.

Through resonance comes cognisance; through cognisance comes understanding; through understanding comes knowledge; through knowledge comes life and well-being.