

Making A Difference

By Linda E. Lee and Maxine Zimmerman

A New Vision for Student Voice



Photo courtesy of the Manitoba School Improvement Program Inc.

Who has more stake in high school education than high school students? The Manitoba School Improvement Program Inc. (MSIP)¹ is a school improvement program that believes strongly in the importance of meaningful student involvement in education. Throughout its evolution, MSIP has encouraged schools to include students in their improvement efforts, with the ultimate goal of creating better conditions for student learning and engagement in Manitoba high schools. Recently, through combining its passion for student involvement with an array of action-oriented, student-centred initiatives, MSIP has come to a new understanding of, and vision for, “student voice”.

A Passionate Belief in Student Engagement

MSIP is not alone in suggesting that student learning and student engagement must lie at the heart of schools’ improvement efforts. However, the results of a major evaluation of MSIP have helped to make concrete the meaning of the well-used and often vaguely understood term “student engagement”. The evaluation describes two dimensions of engagement: students’ relationship to their external

learning environment (two measures include relationship with teachers and participation in school activities), and students’ personal relationship to their own learning (two measures include the relevance students see in curriculum and student motivation). With these dimensions in mind, MSIP network schools can more accurately assess their progress in creating conditions that foster engagement.

Students, however, can be engaged in their school and their learning on a daily basis without having any influence on, or participation in, their schools’ improvement efforts. MSIP believes that students need to have a voice in these efforts as well. Students can provide both appropriate pressure and support for the change process, particularly when they work with dedicated teachers in their own schools on issues of common interest. As one youth member of MSIP’s own Education Advisory Committee observed:

Some people have given up on public education, but when you know there is a group of dedicated educators who really care, you get excited... students will provide the momentum and energy for change if they know the support is there. You can build momentum through student excitement — and this impacts on parents.

Action

MSIP has always encouraged and supported schools in developing strategies for involving students in school improvement efforts as well as in their own learning. In successful MSIP network schools, students have conducted professional development events for staff, hosted parent evenings, held school-wide workshops on teaching and learning, and participated as members of school improvement planning teams. Students have also been involved as researchers, exploring improvement issues through activities such as in-person interviewing of current students and telephone interviewing of graduates.

In the past year, MSIP has looked for ways to test more formally and systematically the potential of different vehicles for student voice. The “Students at the Centre” project, coordinated by an MSIP Student Voice Consultant, has involved 50 students and five teachers from three urban high schools. The purpose of the project is to empower students to have a voice both in their own learning and in the direction of their school. (Contact Samantha Sexton at msiphome@escape.ca for more information.) The project has three main components which are integrated into existing school courses.

- “Learning how to learn” teaches students about multiple intelligences, brain-based learning, learning styles, and emotional intelligence.
- Research projects involve students in all aspects of the research process including designing, developing, administering, interpreting, and presenting results of data collection

activities. (The MSIP Evaluation Consultant acts as a facilitator and technical resource person.)

- Forums for student voice, including a web site and a multi-school student conference, provide public venues for students to raise and discuss educational issues.

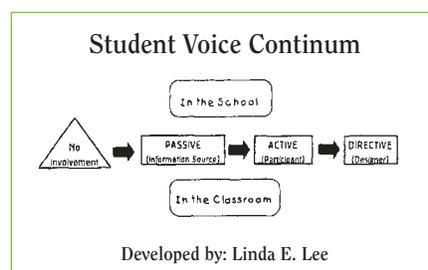
As part of a new partnership, MSIP and a rural school district are testing a new way of informing and involving students at the early stages of their schools' improvement efforts and, at the same time, establishing baseline data on student engagement and student learning. MSIP staff design and run workshops for students, in which 30 to 50 students participate in a series of activities where they identify priorities for the school, assess themselves as learners and report their own levels of engagement. The identified priorities provide the student perspective to the school improvement teams who are in the early stages of planning and implementation. Baseline data for all or a large proportion of the student population is captured as part of the process when profiles are completed by students at the end of the workshop. (In some cases 50 students represent the entire high school population.) These student profiles provide individual data on engagement and on the student's individual strengths and needs as a learner. The student profile also includes a format for tracking indicators of student learning over time (i.e. marks and credit acquisition).

MSIP is working with another school to help students design a vehicle for student voice. The process, still in its early stages, has seen high school students — with the support of school administration — propose a totally new structure for giving students a say in school issues and direction. The proposed structure has implications for a revised student council (both in mandate and structure), for new cross-grade organizational groupings, and for training 40 to 50 students in facilitation and leadership skills. An initial student workshop, attended by 20 students who had been nominated by their peers, began the process. Feedback from the workshop

was also a means of introducing staff to the concept of student voice as a component of school improvement. In this case, an emphasis on student voice is being used as an entry point for staff discussion on school improvement.

A New Vision for Student Voice

Much like Michael Fullan's "ready, fire, aim," MSIP developed a new vision of student voice through getting ready, taking and encouraging action, and then reflecting and refocusing. MSIP now conceptualizes student voice along a continuum.



Student Voice Continuum

In school improvement efforts, for example, some schools involve students by using them as important sources of information, collecting data through surveys or focus groups with students. Here students play an important, but fundamentally passive role. In moving towards a more active role, students become participants in school improvement efforts, influencing the process through conducting action research, for example. At the directive stage, students not only influence the process of school improvement, but also help create the process by becoming partners in its design.

The continuum is not intended to suggest that all schools need to have students involved at the directive end, but rather to point out the different ways in which students can be involved. There will be factors of readiness, context, and resources that will affect when and how students can be reasonably and effectively involved at a particular school.

The same continuum can be applied to the classroom where students may assume different roles over the course of a year. How are students involved in their own learning? Are they passive — recipients of content, providing

feedback to the teacher through their performance? Are they active participants in the classroom? Do they have a role in assessing and directing their own learning?

Conclusion

MSIP is continuing to learn about the power and promise of student voice both at the school level and in relation to students' engagement in their own learning. Recent feedback from students suggests that networks may be important for students as well as for educators. The potential of this concept has yet to be explored.

I am hoping for the future that maybe we can host a meeting and have other schools come to us... to see what we're fighting for to improve our school — so that they can see what we're trying to do... I hope MSIP continues in the future.

I wish there were maybe a few more people [students] involved because it's really interesting and we can use all the help we can get with bringing different schools together ... I think it's been very beneficial to us and to our school

A grade 10 student, Students at the Centre project

The challenge of an ever-changing student population must be acknowledged — but no one said school improvement was going to be easy! Of course, appropriate supports and resources must be in place to nourish student voice. But, if we believe student learning and engagement are truly at the heart of school improvement, student voice may indeed be its conscience. ■

¹ MSIP is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization, founded in 1991 by the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. The Foundation continues to be an MSIP partner, along with Manitoba Education and Training, the Thomas Sill Foundation, the Manitoba Association of School Trustees and the Winnipeg Development Agreement (WDA). The WDA is the funder for the Students at the Centre Project.

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