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## LISTEN UP: STUDENT VOICE AND EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

After many years of relative quiet, the concept of student voice is enjoying a resurgence of sorts in education. Different from notions of voice as student empowerment popularized in the 1960s, the “new wave”<sup>1</sup> of student voice taps into important advances in thinking about student engagement and the transformation of schooling for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And while student engagement has emerged in education policy circles through an entirely different route than the student-led movements of the 1960s, questions still remain as to whether our school systems – and the public who judge their quality – are any more ready now than they were fifty years ago to actively engage student voices in making a difference in their own lives as learners and as members of school communities involved in the complex process of educational change.

Prioritizing the role of young people as active participants in learning and educational change is not, as many authors note, a matter of turning schools over to students, but an ongoing process of recognizing that “students are genuine citizens of their schools, not merely temporary captives of them.”<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the ambition of student engagement requires us to question our inclination to still view student voice as a radical concept and our tendency to still confuse consultation on pre-determined agendas with genuine engagement of students’ diverse ideas about the schools they want.<sup>3</sup> It also challenges us – as Penny Milton discussed in a recent issue of *Education Canada* – to rethink our concept of adolescence and to provide students with some relief from “premature judgements about their intentions, interests and abilities.”<sup>4</sup>

Failure to engage more deeply with young people in conversations about their learning risks increased student disengagement. Regardless of whether we are able to hear them, students do have a voice and too many youth, especially those from the most vulnerable groups in society, continue to tell us that school is not for them. Decisions to leave school early are often a combination of school and personal factors, but persistent dropout rates send a compelling message to school systems about the mismatch that exists in focussing on improved student outcomes without asking students themselves to share their views about the changes required to help all students achieve them.

In addition to providing a powerful mechanism for connecting with students whose voices are often marginalized in schools, there is growing evidence about the benefits of engaging student voices in classroom practice and school decision-making:

### For Students

- Deeper engagement with learning;
- Improved meta-cognitive skills;
- Enhanced relationships among students and staff;
- Increased learner commitment and responsibility;<sup>5</sup>
- Improved achievement of youth development outcomes (e.g., agency, belonging, competence),<sup>6</sup> including the development of skills necessary for students to participate as active citizens beyond the classroom.<sup>7</sup>

### For Schools

- Improved capacity to be:
  - Inclusive;
  - Creative;
  - Responsive to the complexity of students’ lives;
  - Adaptive;
  - Innovative.
- Increased ability to address ethnic, racial, socio-economic, and gender gaps in achievement;<sup>8</sup>
- Enhanced ability to understand and respond to the complexity of school change.

Ultimately, the benefits of student engagement also transcend schools and support the achievement of broader social and educational goals. Leadbeater, for one, points out that “Asking young people what kind of school they would like presumes the continued existence of schools as viable and desirable social and education institutions,”<sup>9</sup> while Caplan quotes Ken Osborne in providing evidence that young people who get their “first taste of democratic citizenship” and learn that their views and actions count in school, are more likely to be active, involved, and committed to the larger community and society around them as they transition to adult roles.<sup>10</sup>

There are many local, regional and provincial/ territorial examples of student engagement at work across the country. As of yet, however, the development of learning communities that bring together a diversity of student and adult voices in plotting a course for change are still the exception rather than the norm. Creating school cultures that prioritize student voices represents a significant change for schools and “may not yet be possible using existing methods.”<sup>11</sup> However, the way forward need not be as complicated as we imagine: why not start by asking students what they think? |

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### Notes

- 1 Fielding, “New Wave Student Voice and the Renewal of Civic Society,” *London Review of Education* 2, no. 3 (November 2004).
- 2 K. Osborne in G. Caplan, “Good Schools, Good Citizens: A Discussion,” *Council of Ministers of Education Third National Forum on Education* (CMEC, November 1998). <http://www.cmec.ca/nafored/ctf.en.stm>
- 3 T. Rudd, F. Colligan and R. Naik, *Learner Voice* (Futurelab, 2006) [www.futurelab.org](http://www.futurelab.org)
- 4 P. Milton, “Re-thinking Adolescence,” *Education Canada* 47, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 27.
- 5 Rudd et al, 4.
- 6 D.L. Mitra, “The Significance of Students: Can Increasing ‘Student Voice’ in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?,” *Teachers College Record* 106, no.4 (April, 2004): 655.
- 7 Rudd et al, 8.
- 8 A. Fletcher, *Meaningful Student Involvement Guide to Students as Partners in School Change* (SoundOut.org and HumanLinks Foundation, 2005):9.
- 9 C. Leadbeater in M. Fielding, “New Wave Student Voice and the Renewal of Civic Society,” *London Review of Education* 2, no. 3 (November 2004): 213.
- 10 G. Caplan, “Good Schools, Good Citizens: A Discussion,” *Council of Ministers of Education Third National Forum on Education* (CMEC, November 1998). <http://www.cmec.ca/nafored/ctf.en.stm>
- 11 Rudd et al, 2.