

## YOUTH VOICE

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### What Is Youth Voice?

In service-learning, youth voice has been defined as “the inclusion of young people as a meaningful part of the creation and implementation of service opportunities” (Fredericks, Kaplan, & Zeisler, 2001, p. 1). Youth should have input in planning, implementing and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults. Input should include the generation of ideas and making decisions during all phases of the service-learning activities, involving youth and adults in creating an environment that supports trust and open expression of ideas, and helping young people acquire leadership and decision-making skills. Having opportunities to be heard and to partner with adults in improving schools and communities can help young people master developmental tasks, form stronger commitments to school and community, and act as agents of social change.

### Application to Service-Learning

- In service-learning, voice is enhanced when practitioners ensure that all partners have a clear understanding of its meaning and buy into its importance, give youth opportunities for input into all stages of service-learning projects, and scaffold young people’s capacities to assume responsibility (Fredericks et al., 2001).
- Hart (2007) showed that middle-school students’ level of engagement in a literacy service project increased when they were given autonomy over literacy service events. When teachers established more control over events or decisions about meetings or materials, students generally disengaged from the project. Students’ autonomy over the literacy service project revealed a strong positive correlation with higher academic engagement and achievement.
- In a peer-to-peer service project centered on seat belt use, Bradley, Eyler, Goldzweig, Juarez, Schlundt, and Tolliver (2007) found that when high school students had ownership over the development and presentation of the service project they showed increases in self-confidence, personal efficacy, interpersonal, communication, and critical thinking skills. Student involvement was also shown to be a predictor of increased student school and community engagement.
- Giving young people a say in every phase of a service-learning project has been shown to have a strong influence on all forms of engagement, both academic and civic (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005).
- Research demonstrates that when youth are not actively involved in service-learning experiences they become dissatisfied with their experiences. They feel discouraged, alienated, not respected, and believe that their contributions are unimportant. More voice allows young people to become an integral part of the process and shape their own service-learning experiences, which may lead to increased interest in community engagement in the long run (Fredericks et al., 2001).
- Bradley (2003) noted, “When students are personally involved in selecting the service activity, they are far more likely to buy into the program and care about what happens” (p. 59).
- Blyth, Saito, and Berkas (1997) found that the more opportunities youth had to plan and work together, the better the outcomes. “The more group oriented the service project is, the more impact on social responsibility and intent to serve. The more personally responsible youth are for their own service experience, the greater the chances it affects them personally—assuming they reflect on the experiences in a structured way” (p. 52).

- In a national study of service-learning programs for students aged 12-18, Spring, Dietz, and Grimm (2006) found that when students had roles in planning projects, as well as sufficient duration of programs and opportunities for reflection, they were more likely to say they would engage in service in the next year, become more interested in world events, and feel more efficacious.
- The “KIDS as Planners” model of youth voice in service-learning evolved from a program in Maine that encouraged the state’s communities to plan for their future. Communities needed help in this process and a former teacher and state planner recognized that young people could contribute. Students were engaged in local planning efforts that allowed them to learn academic subjects as they worked to solve genuine local needs. Students took on roles as planners and decision makers with adults acting as coaches and facilitators. More than 85% of participating teachers reported that this model provided students with “opportunities to construct knowledge, learn effective communication skills, and apply in-depth learning beyond school most of all of the time” (KIDS Consortium, 2001, p. 9).
- Morgan and Streb (2003) discovered that students who had more opportunities to express their voice in service-learning projects made greater gains in political knowledge, were less cynical about government, and had a greater desire to be politically active than others.

### **Educational Research Supporting This Concept**

- Mitra (2004) found that high school students who were given opportunities for voice in school made gains in three characteristics associated with positive youth development: agency, belongingness, and competence. When students felt their ideas were heard, they increased their ability to articulate opinions to others, constructed new identities as change makers, and developed a greater sense of leadership (agency). Opportunities for youth to develop positive forms of identification led to improved interactions with teachers, increased attachment to school, and willingness to develop relationships with caring adults (belongingness). As students worked with teachers to develop leadership skills, they also developed problem solving, facilitation, and public speaking skills (competence).
- Oldfather (1995) found that enhancing student voice in school gave disconnected youth a sense of ownership and helped them to re-connect to school. Student voice opportunities helped young people to gain a stronger sense of their own abilities and build student awareness so they could make changes in their schools for themselves and others.
- In a study for the California campaign for the civic mission of schools, the Constitutional Rights Foundation in collaboration with the Center for Civic Education and the Alliance for Representative Democracy (2005) found that when students were given the opportunity to voice their opinions regarding school policy, they were more likely to participate in service activities when compared to those that were not given the opportunity to voice their opinions. Additionally, student voice in school/class governance was also shown to increase social and political trust.
- In a study of youth governance in community organizations, Zeldin (2004) found that leadership opportunities helped a majority of youth explore identity issues and gain a sense of connectedness to the community.
- Zeldin and colleagues (2000) found that in community organizations where young people played leadership roles, adults developed more favorable views of youth, confidence in their ability to interact with them, and a stronger sense of connection to the community. In addition, organizations, which included youth in leadership positions, adapted their missions and goals to include youth-oriented language; and their policies and practices to routinely include youth became more responsive to the needs of youth.

- Kohn (1993) noted that traditional school policies, rules, laws, and beliefs might create a climate where teachers do not feel they have input into decisions that are made by administrators. Teachers, in turn, desire to have more control in their classroom and therefore do not want to turn over decision making to students for fear of losing that control. Student resistance to being involved, even when given the opportunity, stems from being told what to do at home and at school.
- Wang and Stiles (1976) showed that second-grade students who were given choice about their learning, including the tasks they would tackle, tended to complete more learning tasks in less time.
- Larson, Walker, and Pearce (2004) found that in youth-driven programs, high school students experienced high degrees of ownership and empowerment and reported learning multiple leadership and planning skills. They also gained self-confidence and reported learning skills from the adults.
- Stereotypes that adults and youth have of each other present challenges related to youth voice, such as adults assuming that youth do not yet possess leadership capabilities, and youth feeling that not all adults are trustworthy. Adults often believe it is easier to engage youth who have already been identified as leaders (Justinianno & Scherer, 2001).
- In schools, strategies for promoting voice include gathering information from students through surveys and focus groups, involving students as researchers, and engaging students as equal partners in school reform. In communities, young people can provide meaningful input by consulting with government leaders about public policy, participating in community coalitions, engaging in organizational decision making, taking action, and carrying out service-learning projects (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

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