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ABSTRACT

Student voice is a concept and a set of approaches that position students alongside credentialed educators as critics and creators of educational practice. Student voice and student agency are closely linked when school stakeholders connect the sound of students speaking with students having the power to influence practices and analyses of education. In this article I draw on empirical studies conducted in a range of contexts to present an overview of approaches to student voice that foster student agency. These approaches focus on students working with teachers and researchers to analyze classroom practice, engage in research through various methods, and author and coauthor texts, all with the goal of maximizing and democratizing education for everyone involved. Implications of this discussion include suggestions for teachers, school principals, teacher educators, and researchers regarding how to support student voice such that it fosters student agency.

Student voice has evolved as both a concept and a set of practices since the 1990s and 2000s when the term first became widely used (Fielding, 2001; Levin, 2000; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; SooHoo, 1993). Genuine student voice work entails positioning students to "identify and analyze issues related to their schools and their learning that they see as significant" (Fielding & Bragg, 2003, p. 4) and to have their voices inform action. If there is a gap between voice and agency (Holdsworth, 2000)—understood as students' ability to exert influence in their learning context, to transform their own and others' learning experiences, and to expand learning—then Lundy's (2007) critique that "voice is not enough" holds true. If, however, voice and agency are closely linked, as I argue they should be, then school stakeholders "connect the sound of students speaking not only with those students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence but also with their having the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 363).

In this article I offer an argument for why student voice matters in fostering student agency, and I draw on empirical studies conducted in a range of contexts to present an overview of approaches to student voice that foster student agency. These approaches focus on students working with teachers and researchers to analyze classroom practice, engage in research through various methods, and author and coauthor texts, all with the goal of maximizing and democratizing education for everyone involved. I conclude with suggestions for teachers, school principals, teacher educators, and researchers regarding how to support student voice such that it fosters student agency.

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Why student voice matters in fostering student agency

The development of student agency includes creating mechanisms through which students are included in meaningful processes of analyzing teaching and learning such that their voices and perspectives inform classroom practices. It also includes creating opportunities for research that includes students as partners, such as youth-led participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mitra & McCormick, 2017; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009) and collaborative action research. These forms of research see young people as "social actors and experts on their own lives" (Cowie & Khoo, 2017; Nelson, 2015), and institutions of secondary and tertiary education can collaborate to teach youth how to engage in such research (see Fine et al., 2004). And finally, the development of student agency includes inviting students to author and coauthor analyses of teaching and learning—to name what they know and present it to a wider audience. Student voice and agency in schools—students' ability to exert influence in their learning context, to transform their own and others' learning experiences, and to expand learning—do not aim to replace the authority and responsibility of seasoned practitioners and certified professionals but rather "to legitimate alongside those experts the experiences, perspectives, and expertise of students" (Cook-Sather, 2014) in order to maximize and democratize education for all involved.

These student voice approaches require a shift in mind-set and a sharing of power (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mayes et al., 2017). They require the recognition of students as those with essential perspectives on learning and the creation of conditions under which the power and responsibility for educational practice and research are shared. As Berryman, Eley, and Copeland (2017) assert:

> By sharing power with students, by listening to them and seeking to follow their advice, we have learned that educators, researchers and policy makers are more likely to promote contexts through which the voiceless have voice, the powerless have power and from such spaces hope can emerge (Freire, 1994, p. 491).

When students "speak and act alongside credentialed educators as critics and creators of educational practice" (Cook-Sather, 2018, p. 17), the relationship between "voice" and "agency" or "action" (Holdsworth, 2000, p. 357) is strong. As a growing number of researchers argue, student voice has the potential to: open up spaces and capacities "for racial and ethnic historically marginalized youth to play key roles in school change and hybrid learning spaces" (Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, & Artiles, 2017); support more socially just school environments (Mansfield, 2014; Salisbury, Rollins, Lang, & Spikes, 2019; Taines, 2014); ensure that disenfranchised youth are included in decision-making processes (Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Salisbury et al., 2019); and foster positive youth development around agency and civic engagement (Brasof & Spector, 2016; Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

Approaches to student voice in analyses of classroom practice

While the earliest efforts to involve students in analyses of classroom practice took place in the United Kingdom and, to a lesser degree, in Canada (e.g., Levin, 2000) and the United States (e.g., Oldfather, 1995), efforts in these and other countries have proliferated. Thiessen and Cook-Sather (2007) published a collection of chapters featuring studies of students' perspectives on their experiences of school in Afghanistan, Australia, Canada, England, Ghana, Ireland, Pakistan, and the United States. Czerniawski and Kidd (2011) collected chapters from authors working on 5 different continents who explored the relationships between student voice and

action research, citizenship, democratic education, and students-as-researchers. And a recent collection co-edited by Bourke and Loveridge (2018) included chapters documenting student voice efforts in Aotearoa New Zealand focused on partnering with students of both Māori and European descent.

All of these collections provide examples of student voice practices that link voice and agency. For example, at the primary level, one of the chapters in Thiessen and Cook-Sather's collection reported on a study of the ways 2 8-year-old students participated in their science classroom, which revealed the nuance and complexity of these students' interpretations of what and how they learn. These student interpretations informed their classroom teacher's approach to developing curriculum that was "responsive to children's ideas" (Ballenger, 2007, p. 112). At the more systemic level, student insights can inform how standards are enacted. Bourke and Loveridge (2018) invited 8- and 12-year-old students in New Zealand primary schools to analyze their learning experiences under the new National Standards. The students noted a disconnect between "learning as it is assessed and learning as they experience it" (p. 143), an insight that supports the embrace of an achievement rather than a measurement agenda.

One of the most wide-reaching and enduring models of student voice that transforms students' own and others' learning experiences at the secondary level is the "Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together" (YATST) organization in Vermont, created by Helen Beattie and now under the umbrella of "UP for Learning." Through this organization, secondary students and teachers are trained to work in partnership to analyze and revise educational approaches. Since 2008, nearly 2,700 youth have taken on active leadership roles in at least one of UP's initiatives. In addition, UP has worked with 44% of Vermont middle schools and 95% of Vermont high schools in all 14 counties; trained student leaders through 334 programs in a total of 113 Vermont schools, and supported 110 educators in completing an UP graduate course.

Examples of action that has resulted from the student agency supported by YATST include student-led faculty meetings to introduce the 4-Rs framework (rigor, relevance, relationships, and shared responsibility) and analyze school data; the development of a mid-semester feedback system that provides all students an opportunity to offer feedback on classroom instruction; and monthly, student-led Principal Roundtables to engage students in school decisions (examples from https://www.upforlearning.org/initiatives/yatst/; for discussions of this program, see Beattie 2012; Beattie, Rich, & Evans, 2015; Biddle, 2017; Biddle & Mitra, 2015). Cleveland High School, one of Seattle's historically most under-resourced public schools, has facilitated a number of relationships and practices focused on student voice and offered a YATST workshop ("A Motivational Lens on Transformative Youth-Adult Partnership Experiences") in Vermont to share some of its practices. (See Chopra, 2014, for a discussion of this work.)

These student voice efforts are examples of primary and secondary students' ability both to exert influence in their own learning contexts and to inform understandings of the broader learning context. By offering their perspectives on their learning experiences and having those perspectives heeded and acted upon, in the case of the primary students, and by working in partnership with teachers, school leaders, and consultants, in the case of YATST, students experience and develop a sense of agency.

Approaches to student voice in research

In the realm of research with students, a range of methods supports student participation, partnership, and leadership. In conducting student voice research it is important to

consult with young people who have engaged or will engage with the methods: "Without such consultation, there is the risk that methods—however novel or well-intended—promote tokenistic, rather than genuine, participation" (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, & Bottrell, 2014, p. 132).

For the youngest students, for instance, the existential-phenomenological method (open-minded, contextual, and relational observations and interviews) has been used to access 5–7 year-old Finnish children's analyses of their experiences of day care as those experiences appear to the children themselves (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta, 2012; see also Groundwater-Smith et al., 2014; Wall, 2017). The ethics of research with young people are particularly delicate, especially when working across cultures. Bourke, Loveridge, O'Neill, Erueti, and Jamieson (2017) advise "maintaining open-ended processes and attitudes so as to develop an understanding of the particular cultural, socioeconomic, familial and community contexts in which the research is being conducted" (p. 269). Research methods for working with young students need to be particularly attentive to those students' contexts and to their individual vulnerability because of their age.

For older students, methods such as interviews (Quinn & Owen, 2016) and action research (Smit, 2013) position students to analyze educational practices, make recommendations, and effect change in schools. Interactive research methods can access the perspectives of young people on a variety of issues (Kiragu, Swartz, Chikovore, Lukalo, & Oduro, 2012), and youth-led participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mitra & McCormick, 2017; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009) and collaborative action research afford teachers opportunities to learn from students about and enact effective pedagogy (Nelson, 2015).

While such research approaches are important for students of all identities and in all contexts, they are particularly important for students who have been underrepresented in and underserved by schools. For instance, little research on culturally responsive teaching practices in elementary schools has examined African-American "students' perceptions and interpretations of these pedagogical practices" (Howard, 2001, p. 131). Like YATST work in the United States (Beattie et al., 2015; Chopra, 2014), the work of Merry Berryman and her colleagues in Aotearoa New Zealand provides an example of dedicated student voice research that strives to transform the experiences of Māori youth, who have been consistently undervalued in and underserved by their schools.

Building on her early classroom-focused student voice research (Bishop & Berryman, 2006), Berryman's more recent research presents the voices and perspectives of Māori youth regarding the disparities and inequities that remain in their schools, despite the secondary school reform initiative sponsored by the New Zealand Ministry of Education aimed at ensuring that "Māori students enjoy and achieve educational success" (Berryman & Eley, 2017, p. 93). Through a series of research projects that spanned many years and supported conversations between 12- to 15-year-old students, principals, teachers, and whānau [extended family members] from 5 secondary school communities, teachers in these communities were able to develop a relational, then culturally responsive, and finally reciprocally dialogic pedagogy that better supported Māori success in school. As Berryman et al. (2017) explain: "By altering the power relationships and pedagogies within classrooms, teachers found that the students' cultural values could enhance cognitive engagement and subsequent achievement" (p. 483).

Through deliberately creating a "research stance where establishing respectful relationships with participants was central to both human dignity and the research" (Berryman, SooHoo, &

Nevin, 2013, p. 1), Berryman and her colleagues were able to create the conditions under which student voice was closely linked with student agency. As they explain: "Students were moved to take direct and collective action where they saw Māori students being under-served"; in one school community, "rangatahi [younger generation] Māori initiated a national petition to require schools to include within their curriculum" matters pertaining to a period of New Zealand's colonial history that was marked by armed invasion by British militia and subsequent widespread confiscation of Māori land (Berryman et al., 2017, p. 489).

Actively engaging students in investigations of and interventions into social problems that affect their lives, and partnering in particular with youth who are underserved by schools (Brown & Rodríguez, 2017; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009, 2018), not only ensures that adult educators, researchers, administrators, and policy makers are better informed, it affords youth an opportunity to experience empowerment and agency and be part of necessary change.

Approaches to student voice in authorship

Even the best intentions in the realm of student voice work can reify the power dynamics that are structured into most educational systems, school practices, and publication. Groundwater-Smith et al. (2014) highlight the "ethical and political nature of decisions concerning children and young people's participation in publication and dissemination" (p. 160) of educational research. They recommend careful consideration of: Who may speak and to whom; alternative formats to traditional paper publications, such as "Speak-outs" and performance/theater, arts exhibitions; online or hard copy reports in the form of youth brochures, magazines, comics or posters; and the consequences of dissemination and publication, both positive and negative (p. 160; see also Fine et al., 2004).

Publications that include or constitute student-authored or coauthored pieces enact a form of student agency in relation to representations of their schooling experiences. For instance, for nearly 40 years, Roger Holdsworth has published the newsletter/magazine *Connect*, with support from the Youth Research Center, The University of Melbourne, Australia. *Connect* aims to: document student participation approaches and initiatives, support reflective practices, and develop and share resources (http://research.acer.edu.au/connect/). An edited volume, *In Our Own Words: Students' Perspectives on School* (Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001), includes 8 chapters, each coauthored by secondary students and adults on issues such as why students cut class, implementing an innovative math program, and equity issues in schools. Finally, a new peer-reviewed, open access, e-journal, the *International Journal of Student Voice*, was created, as the website explains, to feature examples of "ways in which students co-lead their schools and communities by collaborating with teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders to define problems and develop potential solutions and/or take the lead on making change in their schools and communities" (https://ijsv.psu.edu/).

Rather than writing *about* students, as used to be the case in virtually all educational research, these and other publications have students fill the pages with their voices not to "prove" or support researcher claims but rather to make claims of their own. These venues support students' assertion "nothing about us without us," a slogan embraced by the *International Journal of Student Voice* that was originally created, along with an image depicting the concept, for the Learner Voice Conference at Trinity College Dublin, The

University of Dublin, Ireland (2015, June 26–27). These examples of students experiencing agency in realms outside of school can inform the sense of agency they feel in school.

Implications

There are implications of this work for teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and educational researchers. Teachers can develop strategies that allow them to gain a deeper understanding of teaching and learning processes and to change the way they think about students and their learning (Cook-Sather, 2009; Flutter, 2007). They can develop ways to expand students' active participation in school, casting teachers as co-learners, facilitating student-teacher "border crossings," and redistributing power among teachers and students (Bahou, 2012). And they can participate in the development of district-wide efforts to "create spaces for marginalized youth to collectively learn about social injustices and develop common, and individual, voices to disrupt these injustices" (Salisbury, Rollins, Lang et al., 2019).

School administrators can initiate partnerships with colleges, universities, or departments of teacher education; integrate such partnerships into the culture of the school; and recruit and reward teachers committed to student voice and engagement. The ways that they can integrate partnerships into the culture of the school include:

- issuing school-wide invitations to participate and creating a sense of seriousness, even competition, in which teachers and students will be selected to participate;
- making time and providing support for orientation to the student-faculty-staff collaboration that constitutes and enables this work through sponsoring a day-long or half-day orientation on site at which participants discuss the rationale and premises of the collaboration, invite past participants to share their insights and advice, and generally create continuity across years of participation;
- integrating opportunities for participation into the regular school schedule (as opposed to having them squeezed after school between classes and sports or clubs) and, by extension, into the curriculum;
- planning professional development days around student input and lessons from the collaboration and around what teachers learn through their participation in student voice efforts and having teachers and students co-present at these events; and
- inviting student and teacher participants to share their insights at faculty, school board, and Parent-Teacher Association meetings or in other forums of school-wide and district-wide discussion. (See Cook-Sather, 2007, for an extended discussion of these and other approaches).

Teacher educators can develop programs that position students as teacher educators (Cook-Sather & Curl, 2016; Petrone & Sarigianides, 2017; Pope, Beal, Long, & McCammon, 2011; Youens, 2009). Through positioning secondary students in semester-long partnerships with undergraduate pre-service teachers, for instance, the Teaching and Learning Together program develops in prospective teachers the capacity to learn *with* students to consistently improve practice; supports the empowerment of high school students who, positioned as teacher educators, develop confidence and take ownership

over their own learning; and fosters strong student-teacher relationships among those participating in the project (Cook-Sather & Curl, 2016).

Educational researchers, as we all of the stakeholders mentioned above, can partner with students to support their publishing their experiences, perspectives, and calls for change. Newsletters and journals such as *Connect* and the *International Journal of Student Voice* and edited volumes that feature chapters authored and coauthored by students foreground student voices and foster students' agency beyond their school contexts.

Conclusion

Action can take many forms: implementing immediate changes in pedagogical practice; working for a shift in mind-set that will affect evolving schooling practices; repositioning students such that they continue to have voice and agency in research and scholarship on schooling practices. Such action has implications for all students, but again, it is particularly important that students who have been traditionally underrepresented and underserved. Through fostering a sense of agency in students through the three arenas discussed here, we support the development of students who are engaged in school, feel recognized and valued for their contributions, and are prepared to participate in civic life.

Disclosure statement

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Additional Resources

1. SpeakUp website http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/students/speakup/
One of several projects through the Ontario Student Voice initiative, initiated by the Ministry of Education in Ontario, Canada, through which thousands of students in grades 7–12 have actively led or participated in more than 10,000 projects in hundreds of schools. Student Voice aims to promote student engagement and success in Ontario's schools by listening to and learning from students. Student Voice provides students with a variety of ways to share their ideas with their school, the education community and the ministry about what would help support their engagement in their learning. Student Voice can help students take action to shape their learning environment while they build their skills.

2. Up for Learning website https://www.upforlearning.org/
UP for Learning is a nonprofit organization in Vermont, USA, dedicated to amplifying the role of youth as partners and agents of change in education to ensure that youth: own their learning; participate actively in school change; have personal power and purpose; possess leadership skills, and are civically engaged. In pursuit of these outcomes, UP for Learning crafts innovative, student-centered education initiatives and supports schools with customized training, coaching, graduate courses, professional development, and online resources.

3. SoundOut website https://soundout.org/
Based in Olympia, Washington, USA, SoundOut works with K-12 schools to provide expert services focused on student voice, student engagement and meaningful student involvement.

Founded by Adam Fletcher, SoundOut has worked with more than 300 schools in 20 states across the United States, several Canadian provinces, and many other countries internationally. They are hired by school districts, state agencies, and education-focused nonprofits, and their website provides a wide variety of resources.