

Beyond voice: Students as partners in improvement

JOHN CLEARY AND SUMMER HOWARTH

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Introduction

Working alongside students as ‘partners in improvement’ is not simply about students having a seat at the table. It is about redefining the table – asking what is on the table? Where is the table situated? And what power do all those at the table actually have? It is about students as co-creators of their learning environments, influencing their academic journeys and contributing to school and system improvement.

Historically, student involvement in education was often limited to passive roles, where students were seen primarily as recipients of knowledge. Over time, this perspective has shifted towards more inclusive and participatory models. This evolution towards a more genuine partnership reflects a growing recognition of the unique insights and contributions that students can offer. This shift is rooted in principles of the rights of children and young people, equity and co-design, challenging traditional power dynamics and fostering a more collaborative approach to education.

In the tradition of voice in education literature, whether it is being ‘consulted in contexts’ (Skerritt et al, 2023), ‘amplified’ (Mitra, 2008) or described as ‘a way of being’ (Quaglia and Fox, 2018), there can be an interchangeability or lack of distinction between the concepts of voice, agency and empowerment. Statements that ‘it is important to listen to the voices of students’ are not new. They can, however, be hollow.

The reality is that ‘Students as Partners’ is a complex and transformative approach, which redefines the traditional roles within learning environments, including schools and systems. Achieving it takes careful design and consideration. This concept is not about simply giving students a voice; it extends beyond conventional student engagement and involves students deeply in designing, trialling and implementing improvement directions.

In this paper we tackle the challenges of such partnerships, including the need for building trust and balancing power dynamics, and we discuss strategies to sustain these partnerships effectively. We intend to provide a clear picture of the potential benefits of this approach, with insights into the future directions for student partnerships in education, understanding why this is not just a fleeting trend but a robust approach to educational reform.

The importance of a partnership between students and educators to improve practice and student learning experiences must also translate to the work of a school leader. How can leaders ensure students bring their knowledge and expertise to guide the design of improvement efforts, giving them the best possible chance of achieving their aims? In this journey, it has become clear ‘that voice is not enough’ (Lundy, 2007).

It is essential to acknowledge the transformative impact of ‘Inside the Black Box’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998) as a milestone for educators, particularly in its support for readers to translate its guidance into practice and its advocacy regarding the importance of the self-esteem of pupils, their role in self-assessment and the partnership between teacher and student to achieve individual improvements as profoundly social and personal – but one that ultimately is ‘driven by what teachers and pupils do’ (1998, p 14).

‘Achievement and engagement are higher at schools that allow students to voice their opinions in decision-making about their education’

The importance of partnership was notably described within the Australian government-endorsed *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* (Gonski et al, 2018). The report pointed to the importance of actively involving students as partners in their learning

and, in particular, about increasing their influence and control over learning design (O’Connell and Lucas, 2016); student feedback about strategies that enhance the use of data to improve student learning (Goss et al, 2015); and establishing continuous feedback loops between students and teachers to strengthen and tailor learning and teaching (Goss et al, 2017).

This argument for partnership recognises that ‘Achievement and engagement are higher at schools that allow students to voice their opinions in decision-making about their education’ (Gonski et al, 2018, p 26).

The act of ‘Giving students a ‘voice’ in their learning’ (Gonski et al, 2018, p 26), as described in the report, may also be reflective of the taken-for-granted assumptions about voice, participation, agency and empowerment that exist (Kilkelly et al, 2005); and the challenge

of tokenism present within the ‘voice’ and ‘agency’ movements, as well as its counterproductive impact on both student and adult participants, where engagement in such experiences does not lead to any notable improvement (Lundy, 2007, p 938).

Significantly, the report identified in its third recommendation that all Australian states and territories ‘Ensure all students have the opportunity within schools to be partners in their own learning’ (Gonski et al, 2018, p 26).

The absence of a connection to school improvement in the accompanying description for this recommendation within the report is perhaps indicative of a more significant opportunity to move beyond a more traditional approach, beyond describing ‘students as partners in their learning’, to one that positions this partnership as contributing to school improvement directly. Notably, the report confined the focus of this partnership to schools only, restricting the benefit of this partnership to broader networks of schools or the work of education systems.

The journey through this paper will introduce you to the unique aspects of the P⁴ Model (a partnership of students, educators, leaders and policymakers – partnership to the power of four). This model serves as a framework designed to support those attempting to foster this partnership with students. We explore practical applications of this model, for example with the Northern Territory Learning Commission. This Commission provides various strategies for schools to partner with students in school improvement efforts (see Northern Territory Department of Education, 2021a and b; and 2023). It exemplifies how student partnerships can improve outcomes and create more inclusive, responsive and engaging learning environments, alongside deepening the efficacy of improvement work at a system level.

A systemwide partnership between students, educators, leaders and policymakers in the Northern Territory, Australia

The Northern Territory (NT) is a part of Australia's federation of eight states and territories. With education and early childhood services provided across vast distances and diverse contexts, the Northern Territory Department of Education ensures educational provision for students, young children and their families who are geographically dispersed and highly mobile across 1.35 million square kilometres of the Territory.

A number of key systemwide reviews have recently been undertaken in the Northern Territory. All of them were completed with an agreed-upon design principle that students would be engaged as partners in the design of consultation, exploration of findings and refining of findings and recommendations positioned by each review. – John Cleary

In fact, 70.2 per cent of NT government schools are located in remote and very remote areas, and 40.2 per cent of all students are enrolled in these schools. The NT's diverse student population also includes 14,236 (43.4 per cent) Aboriginal students, and 47.4 per cent of all students have a language background other than English.

The recent 'Review of Secondary Education in the Northern Territory' summarised the context for the delivery of education in the NT, noting the 'challenges and complexities for delivery' as 'more pronounced in the NT than other jurisdictions, impacting students' access to schooling, ability to engage in inclusive

and high-quality learning experiences that meet their needs and, consequently, the trajectory of outcomes and transitions into further study, training, or work' (NT Government, 2024, p i).

A number of key systemwide reviews have recently been undertaken in the Northern Territory. All of them were completed with an agreed-upon design principle that students would be engaged as partners in the design of consultation, exploration of findings and refining of findings and recommendations positioned by each review.

A commitment to the role of partnership with students, about policy for school and system improvement, is now explicitly referenced in both the Education NT Strategy 2021-2025 (NT Department of Education, 2021a, p 5) and in the Education Engagement Strategy 2022-2031 (NT Department of Education, 2021b); with the latter including a commitment to 'Develop consultative and decision-making mechanisms to capture [...] student voice on matters of policy development and program delivery' (NT Department of Education, 2021b, p 20).

This commitment is exemplified through the establishment of a Youth Voice Peak Group (YVPG), including defined terms of reference with a clear purpose and role as partners in system improvement. It is enhanced further still by the establishment of a National Student Voice Council (NSV Council), which met with all commonwealth, state and territory ministers for the first time on 11 December 2023 (Department of Education, 2023a, p 2).

Beyond voice, beyond agency to partnership

John Cleary has been a teacher, principal and education system leader in the Northern Territory over the past 17 years and, prior to that, was an educator in the UK. To explore this partnership with students, he drew on the Harris Federation's work alongside students to develop early ideas about learners, teachers, content and curriculum (Harris Federation, 2012). John developed the NT Learning Commission (NTLC) model as a principal at Casuarina Street Primary School in 2016, alongside four other local schools in the Big Rivers (Katherine) region. Following positive results reported by schools participating in the first commission model, the Commission has now grown to represent over 23,000 students. It includes Northern Territory primary and secondary schools of various types, sizes, geo-localities and stages. Each commission school uses the approach to position students as essential partners in identifying priorities for school improvement.

Summer Howarth joined the Commission in 2017 as a design partner. Her experience in system project development and learning design brings a critical perspective on the structure of the learner experience, to animate the P⁴ Model in practice, with an eye on scale across systems.

John reflects as follows on his move from a teacher in East London to the Northern Territory in 2007.

I had tried to apply these practices directly, but I did not yet understand the importance of culture, context, or the need for my partnership with students to evolve further. My role as a learner in the partnership was now more important than ever. It was a six-month boot camp. Dropping attendance rates, students there in the morning and then simply not returning after recess. My initial response was to look outward. 'There are so many factors influencing my students' lives.' I felt helpless in changing the active disengagement I was experiencing.

Upon reflection, it was a gift. If I was brave enough to accept it, I would receive real-time feedback on the effectiveness of my teaching. My role in the partnership had changed. In the years following, as a teacher and then school leader, my position as a learner in the partnership was vital.

My students supported me in designing learning experiences that more effectively met their needs and expectations. The research-based principles at the heart of my prior work were not compromised, but the language was different, the tools we used were different, and the space and time required for it to work had changed. The adjustments I made as a result of my practice during those first three years and, in subsequent years, working to support schools across the Katherine region, made me a significantly better educator. ***Attendance improved. Outcomes improved. I improved.***

John Cleary

Reimagining the table: The benefits of a partnership with students for system improvement

Up front, it is important to reflect that, done well and in a way that ensures it is truly embedded in the hearts, minds and policies of all those connected to it, working in partnership with students in school and system improvement is hard work.

System-level improvement intentionally brings local improvements to scale. – John Cleary

It is a deliberate and sustained effort – a moral endeavour that requires a commitment to stay the course. It is essential to position a partnership as something without political or ideological allegiance, but one that can benefit all. To

remain true to its purpose, to resist its marginalisation to the realms of program or initiative and, above all else, to advocate relentlessly that it must make a difference to the lives and experiences of those who have placed their trust and energy in its hands.

While any improvement at the school level is dependent on the policies, actions of and relationships with other levels in the system (Golden, 2020), system-level improvement involves integrating a range of interdependent parts, roles and processes to ensure that they can more effectively work together in achieving a shared aim (ACER, 2017). System-level improvement intentionally brings local improvements to scale. It transitions them from one classroom to another and from one system level to the following, embedding improvements as the practice of the many, not the few (LeMahieu et al, 2017).

Working with students as partners in this improvement can bring numerous benefits. This is becoming clearer in our experience of the work of the Learning Commission, especially where an investment in this partnership is maintained over

time (three years or more). These more established partnerships most consistently demonstrate increased positive student and staff responses relating to wellbeing and teacher and student relationships. This is accompanied by increased student engagement in meaningful decisions affecting their learning and school life and, most importantly, an increased trust between all partners.

Trust is the foundation of any meaningful relationship, especially in partnerships between students and educators. When students trust that their insights are valued and their contributions can lead to real change, they engage more deeply, take more risks in their learning and feel a greater sense of belonging and ownership. However, building this trust requires consistent, genuine efforts from adults to listen, act on student input and demonstrate that student ideas can and do shape the learning environment.

Student partnerships also serve as a professional development tool for educators. By working closely with students, teachers gain deeper insights into their needs, preferences and examples of what great learning feels like and looks like, which can inform more effective teaching strategies and increase the consistency of these practices across a school. Engaging in this partnership also provides educators with evidence to achieve national accreditation of their highly accomplished practice, as they increasingly support students and their colleagues in improving.

Implementing a student partnership model involves significant changes in how educators and leaders perceive and interact with students. It requires building trust, respecting students as equal partners and being willing to share authority and decision-making power. Adults must be open to learning from students and adapting their practice due to this feedback.

These partnerships come with challenges. It requires a sustained effort to balance power dynamics and ensure meaningful collaboration.

There must be a genuine commitment from all parties involved to maintain this collaborative effort over time, with a commitment to leveraging students' unique perspectives and energies to co-create more effective, engaging and equitable schools and systems.

What role could a partnership with students play if the insights it generates support not only better decision-making at the individual school level but also informed our decisions at the system level?

John Cleary and NT team

A visible sponsorship and advocacy for this partnership has remained in place from multiple ministers and senior system executives over the last nine years of the NT Learning Commission. This ongoing investment of time and interest cannot be assumed or taken for granted. Demonstrating an alignment between the work of the Commission and the varied priorities of each of these sponsors is an important consideration and one that John, in his position of leading improvement across the NT system, attended to regularly.

A key learning for John was that

It was critical to ensure that students, educators and leaders inside the partnership were in the right room (physically or virtually) at the right time to advance the system's work. It was equally important, however, that when they had the opportunity, we had supported each partnership in sharing their insights in a way that would make them accessible to a range of system partners.

John Cleary

As central to this system improvement, the role of a partnership with students should not be classed as student voice, agency or leadership opportunities. The irony of working with students as partners in learning is that, fundamentally, this work is not singularly about students. Of course, there is a significant design role in which students are central but, if other components within the partnership still need to be included, this work is unlikely to be successful.

Learning commissions

The Northern Territory Learning Commission's (NTLC) learning design has learning and inquiry at its centre and tunes in 'power' to amplify impact in experience and outcomes. One of the standout approaches is enabling students to lead research and analysis that assesses different aspects of school improvement. This hands-on involvement equips students with critical thinking skills. It allows them to make evidence-informed recommendations in partnership with teachers and school leaders, ensuring their voices influence decision-making processes and the school's future improvement agenda.

Regular feedback and reflection mechanisms are integral to the NTLC's strategy. Tools like Google Classroom maintain a continuous loop of feedback, communication and connection, allowing for real-time adjustments to practices and policies, both at an output and outcome level. This approach keeps the dialogue between partners (and expert partner advisors) active. It ensures that the initiatives, ideas or adjustments to practice, which commissions oversee, remain relevant and responsive to the evolving needs identified by the partnership.

Designing for impact: Crafting partnership in practice

The rhythm of the Commission is consistent yet agile. Important milestones and resources – including collaborative workshops with small subsets of commissions organised by theme (working on similar focus areas), geography (proximity to each other) or commonality (for example, middle school structures), along with hybrid support systems (Harte and Howarth, 2022) – further empower

all partners, by involving them in co-designing school improvement initiatives with a range of local and expert insights and ideas.

Good learning design centres on creating engaging, inclusive and practical experiences. It requires a deep understanding of how learners interact with content, one another and their environments. The Commission exemplifies good learning design through its iterative and proven approaches, including an inquiry base, a design perspective and a hybrid delivery offering.

One of the hallmarks of good learning design is its focus on the learner. The Commission's partnership approach recognises that students have unique insights and perspectives that enhance the learning experience for themselves and their peers.

By involving students in decision-making processes, from collecting and analysing data to recommending changes, the NTLC ensures that educational reforms are relevant and address the students' needs

and preferences. An inherent principle of collaboration is extended between students, teachers and the broader community, as they work together on real improvement work, building relationships and trust.

Investing in strategies that strengthen this principle of collaboration is crucial to ensure genuine student participation. The following are a few methods that can help.

- **Shared decision-making:** Involve students in the decisions that affect their learning experiences and outcomes. This empowers students and gives them a practical understanding of the complexities of improving work.
- **Transparency in processes:** Keep students informed about how their input is used and the outcomes it achieves. Transparency fosters trust and shows students that their contributions are taken seriously.
- **Capacity building:** Equip students with the skills they need to contribute effectively. This could include upskilling all partners in data analysis, public speaking or critical thinking. When students feel capable, they are more likely to engage confidently in partnership opportunities.

Incorporating evidence-based strategies is another critical aspect of good learning design. The NTLC uses a data-informed approach to drive and support insights and ideas. The types of data and evidence are constantly evolving, with partners tasked with making decisions about the security and reliability of any data. The core protocols and tools have been adopted and adapted for various contexts, staying consistent, repeated and predictable for commissioners across years of work.

One of the hallmarks of good learning design is its focus on the learner. The Commission's partnership approach recognises that students have unique insights and perspectives that enhance the learning experience for themselves and their peers. – Summer Howarth

The NTLC's application of sound learning design principles has proved effective in engaging students, empowering teacher/student/principal teams and equipping all learners to contribute meaningfully to their learning improvement work. The NTLC is a robust model for how good learning design is more of a partnership curriculum than a program.

Injecting student perspectives into traditionally adult-centric education conversations is a strategy that destabilises the status quo; not to create chaos but to challenge entrenched power dynamics and cultivate a more dynamic, responsive learning ecosystem.

– Summer Howarth

The impact of the NTLC's initiatives on local educational practices and outcomes has been profound. By involving students in designing and implementing school policies and practices, the NTLC has fostered more inclusive and engaging learning environments, while building an apprenticeship into the need to constantly calibrate back to improvement in learning, with even the youngest student commissioners asking, 'How is all of this improving learning?', or commenting '... but we want to know more than what it means to have fun; we want to know what fun in learning is'.

Injecting student perspectives into traditionally adult-centric education conversations is a strategy that destabilises the status quo; not to create chaos but to challenge entrenched power dynamics and cultivate a more dynamic, responsive learning ecosystem. By diversifying the voices at the decision-making table, Learning Commissions enrich dialogues and broaden the spectrum of perspectives, leading to more inclusive and effective educational strategies. This strategic destabilisation sparks innovation and ensures that reforms are deeply informed by those who are most affected – our students.

One of the critical roles played in these commissions is to ensure that successful initiatives at the local level can be scaled up systemwide while maintaining their

student-centred focus. Through structured and visible student participation, we advocate for change and provide a model for enacting it.

In these Learning Commissions, Summer's role involves melding robust theoretical models with tangible, actionable strategies. The design mindset is crucial for ensuring the scalability and sustainability of our initiatives. This approach helps adapt successful local solutions to broader contexts, maintaining their core focus on student engagement and partnership. Constantly tuning the learning design ensures that these models are not only replicable but also adaptable, meeting the diverse needs of a range of people and structures while preserving the integrity of student partnerships.

Case studies

Evidence for Learning (E4L) was established in 2015 by the non-profit Social Ventures Australia (SVA), to support busy educators – especially educational leaders – in increasing learning for all children and young people, regardless of their background, by improving the quality, availability and use of research evidence in schools and early learning settings.

As one of the established partners in the design of the NT Learning Commission, E4L has provided dedicated support for the work of NTLC schools since 2017 (see Vaughan et al, 2019) and partnered with schools inside the Commission for evidence support and understanding data for school and program improvement through considered implementation. Their role is summarised for schools as support to 'bridge the gap between evidence and practice'. This work has continued through a partnership with the educational consultant Susannah Schoeffel, including a connection with the tools and resources available through the team at the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).

Since 2018, E4L has been an evidence partner both within the Commission and for the NT Department of Education. It has captured the experience of principals, teachers and student commissioners, explicitly focusing on their insights to support effective implementation. Their work highlights the elements that commissioners (across years) have felt are essential for the success of their Commission. We call these ‘active ingredients’. When we look at the learnings from Katherine High School, Henbury School and Dripstone Middle School, certain common elements help to glean useful insights for schools examining a commission model in their own contexts (for examples of their practice, see evidenceforlearning.org.au/support-for-implementation/nt-school-improvement-hub/ntlc-implementation-profiles).

A pedagogy for students as partners in improvement: A national opportunity

Lundy and O'Donnell (2021) reflect that since the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989), much of the good practice in child and youth participation has been developed or promoted by NGOs and academics rather than governments (Lundy and O'Donnell, 2021, p 15).

A notable exception to this can be found in the work of the Irish Government in establishing a national framework for youth participation in decision-making. In this example, a partnership between policymakers and academics with expertise in child participation has resulted in both the publication of a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (DCYA, 2015) and, subsequently, a national framework (DCEDIY, 2021) and accompanying resources to bring this

to life for policymakers, professionals, practitioners, academics, researchers and, importantly, children and young people.

A range of non-government and not-for-profit organisations in Australia (Learning Creates Australia, 2023; NIYEC, 2024), alongside bodies like the national, state and territory-based Children's Commissions across Australia, have increasingly advocated for the importance of hearing the voices of children and young people, in regard to decisions which are intended to lead to improvement in outcomes, including the development of resources to support policymakers to ensure this participation is undertaken successfully.

Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools (Gonski et al, 2018) has now been superseded by the recently released report submitted to the Hon Jason Clare MP, Federal Minister for Education, titled *Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* (Department of Education, 2023b).

Following the expert panel's engagement (onsite and via remote video-conferencing technology) with the Learning Commission, including conversations with NTLC schools, students, teachers and principals, during their work to explore opportunities for improvement in the Northern Territory, the Learning Commission model was directly referenced and cited within the panel's final report. The report (Department of Education, 2023b, p 121) describes the Model in the following way.

The Northern Territory Learning Commission's model involves students and teachers collaboratively working on school improvement initiatives, with teachers guiding the process rather than taking sole responsibility.

The report (Department of Education, 2023b, p 127) explores the role of student agency and voice as essential measures of wellbeing, noting that

Student voice can be a key part of teaching approaches for vulnerable students. The Northern Territory Learning Commission saw student voice as a key element of its pedagogical approach of ‘students as partners in their learning’ noting that ‘an evaluation of this approach found that enhanced student voice and agency contributed to improvements in critical outcomes such as writing, reading, growth and inclusion’.

The panel further endorses the opportunity for this work to contribute to improvement nationally with its Finding 15 as they ask all states and territories to consider the following.

All governments, school systems and approved authorities should look to implement and expand models that build student collaboration, voice and agency at the school and system levels.

(Department of Education, 2023b, p 127)

By moving beyond seeing students as beneficiaries of education, to viewing them as essential contributors to the education ecosystem, we can foster a more democratic, inclusive and effective system of schools.

As the expert panel’s findings demonstrate, young people’s participation is becoming more widely acknowledged as an essential contributor to the design of policy, programs and services and an exchange of insights that ensures government organisations’ efforts better reflect the views and lived experience of those they are designed to support.

It would appear that in the recent Australian context, these efforts have the potential to remain focused on the mechanisms of collaboration, voice and agency within this

exchange and become more commonly focused on the rights of the participant or how this exchange may be individually beneficial, rather than the potential benefit to improvement overall at a school and whole-of-system level. By moving beyond seeing students as beneficiaries of education, to viewing them as essential contributors to the education ecosystem, we can foster a more democratic, inclusive and effective system of schools.

Bridging the gap between meaningful youth participation and the factors that underpin efforts towards school improvement, can also support policymakers and leaders who have been tasked with activating a whole-system strategy that celebrates the virtue of increased participation by young people in improvement efforts, but where the guidance as to ‘how’ this can be achieved successfully is unclear.

The *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Study Report* (Productivity Commission, 2022), commissioned by the Australian Government, identified several lessons to be learned from the current National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) – notably that reform activity ‘lacked focus and flexibility’, with the report going on to reflect that, arguably, some of these improvement initiatives can be adopted and advanced at the state and territory level, embedding greater flexibility in their design and implementation (Productivity Commission, 2022, p 9). We would, however, argue that in accompaniment to this need for flexibility, it is the continued absence of an agreed and shared understanding of what is meant by terms such as ‘students as partners in learning’ that often leads to a splintering of efforts – and opposed, or even contradictory positions and reforms – being implemented by different jurisdictions.

The roles of partners in improvement: Leaders and policymakers, educators and students

It is helpful to explore these roles more deeply when considering the interconnected and interdependent roles each partner plays in this partnership.

Leaders and policymakers

Leaders and policymakers are crucial. Their ability to see the entire improvement landscape across the school community, make connections with the whole-system reform, and create space for this partnership, can make or break its impact on others' experiences and mindsets.

'I didn't think students could talk about their learning like that ...' is the phrase we most commonly hear when adults first experience this partnership.

– John Cleary

Leaders' commitments within strategic improvement planning include adequate time, space and resources to support the work of their partnership but, ultimately, to demonstrate whether or not they believe that working in partnership with students can and will lead to better outcomes for the students in their care.

Leaders who believe this is true act in a way that enables this partnership to be

successful. Those who do not can inhibit this partnership's impact (intentionally or unintentionally). Most commonly, they do this by

- narrowing their focus to areas with little ability to impact student outcomes (for example, the design of a school uniform)
- identifying teachers to join this partnership who may not have yet acquired the necessary skills to work in this way

- under-resourcing the implementation of partnership activities and routines (meeting with students at lunch breaks or for periods which are too short for meaningful engagement to occur), or
- through the language they use when describing this work to others across their school community ('our student voice program').

Lundy et al (2024) note that despite a commitment to enable young children to participate in educational decision-making, young children are one of the groups who have traditionally been least likely to be involved in decision-making in their own lives (Lundy et al, 2024, p 4); for reasons including perceptions that young children may lack the capabilities and maturity to be able to form 'reliable' or 'valid' views or opinions about the world around them (Ferreira et al, 2018; Powell et al, 2011); a lack of capacity or understanding on the part of adults on how to create meaningful opportunities (MacNaughton et al, 2007); and a wish to shield children from what may be described as adult or complex issues (Peters, 2020). 'I didn't think students could talk about their learning like that ...' is the phrase we most commonly hear when adults first experience this partnership.

Educators

Educators play the important role of supporting students in translating what they describe in their lived experiences and the experiences of those around them, particularly those who may be currently disengaged from learning or who feel disconnected or unsafe at school. They translate this into the professional language and terminologies used across our profession, while ensuring the fidelity of these contributions is not lost in translation.

Educators have a crucial role to play and are described most commonly by students who work in this partnership as ‘a resource’ for students in this work. They are a resource

- ensuring students’ access to the data needed to delve further into a potential line of inquiry
- helping them to explore and refine their thinking to connect this to the work and expertise of other teachers in the school, with whom they will share their findings, and
- ensuring the work of this partnership is well-known and transparent to others across the community, regardless of their roles within or outside of the partnership itself.

Educators who do this work well are the bridge between what currently is and what can be.

Students

Students bring something no one else can in the partnership: the lived experience of what it means to be a learner at their school. They are also the only partner whose future progress and aspirations depend on the findings of the partnership

being attended to successfully. They advocate that those who are most directly impacted by our decisions should be a partner in those decisions. They have a vested interest and an urgency for things to be better, accompanied by an ability to describe what this change could be and how it might be experienced, but also an energy and advocacy for the change of practice required to make it a reality.

Working with students as partners in learning is an accelerant in shifting adult mindsets about what students are truly capable of when partnering in leading improvement efforts.

– Summer Howarth

A consistent reflection of adults engaged in this work is that when they hear students speak about and use the language of improvement, on the whole, it is responsible for their change in mindset and how they perceive what students are capable of. It is also compelling when students use the language of improvement with others across the school community, both in terms of their commitment to individual changes in practice and to remaining in the school community for more extended periods than they had planned, to ensure the partnership’s work is successful. Working with students as partners in learning is an accelerant in shifting adult mindsets about what students are truly capable of when partnering in leading improvement efforts.

In many years of advancing this work, both locally in the Northern Territory and nationally through a range of devices and opportunities to present to leaders, policymakers and ministers (both state, territory and federal), the predisposition of each group is most commonly to define this work through the narrow lens of ‘voice’. This is a feature of so many of our initial interactions.

It is important to state that there is no lack of goodwill in these interactions. Each of those in varying degrees of authority seeks to engage with the best of intentions. They value students’ opinions, experiences and ideas. They just do not always see the critical role they themselves must play as partners in this engagement.

At one end of the scale, school leaders may register for scheduled events where students attend conferences or entertainment venues, sit in an auditorium and can become passive attendees in adult-led experiences. These experiences may be accompanied by messages of

‘empowerment’ for young people, but they rarely transfer to anything meaningful for the students and educators involved, beyond conversations on the bus ride back to school and sharing the messages they heard with peers or family members. Educators can also be unintentionally positioned as passive in these experiences – either explicitly or implicitly cast in the role of chaperone on a school excursion rather than a partner in the work underway.

At the least helpful end of the scale, some seek to position this work as ‘all about the kids’ – an advocacy of adults as passive, standing back while students lead the magic and do their thing. This is very unhelpful.

Most commonly, this view may be informed by a misinterpretation of Hart’s ‘Ladder of Participation’ (Hart, 1992) or subsequent and notable models of youth participation (Treseder, 1997; Shier, 2001; Wong et al, 2010; Andersson, 2017). The ladder depicts participation across eight hierarchical levels, each represented as the ‘rungs’ of a ladder.

- The bottom three are labelled as manipulation, decoration and tokenism, which are collectively identified as ‘non-participation’.
- The top five rungs consist of ‘assigned but informed’, ‘consulted and informed’, ‘adult-initiated, shared decisions with children’, ‘child-initiated and directed’, and ‘child-initiated, shared decisions with adults’. These have been regularly interpreted by those engaging with Hart’s work as the more desirable levels of participation to work towards.

The oversimplification of this work prompted Hart to explain that his proposed framework was designed to stimulate a much-needed ‘dialogue’ rather

than to prescribe hierarchies or actions (Hart, 2008). An over-simplification of frameworks that seek to conceptualise youth participation can lead to students being in control as the ultimate aim.

The reality may be that this ladder of participation is less of a ladder and more of a dial. One in which there absolutely are circumstances in which students should lead and be empowered to do so. There are, however, several other points within an improvement journey where students request the expertise a partner brings to both identify, interpret and synthesise their findings and what this might mean for a required change in a teacher’s practice or a peer’s experience.

Foundations of a ‘pedagogy for student partnership in school improvement’

In seeking further to understand the contributing factors to a pedagogy of partnership, John’s work has explored the nature of the reported and observed transformative experience for teachers and students, when working as partners in school improvement efforts. This includes the intersecting characteristics between purpose, positioning, perspective, power relations, protection, place and process (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018) that contribute most commonly to this experience for students, teachers and school leaders, with a focus on school improvement and improved learning experiences for students in the Northern Territory.

What makes this experience powerful for educators and students? How might these experiences shape an accompanying pedagogy for partnership with students in school and system improvement?

The question of ‘students as partners in improvement’ occurs at the intersection of three main traditions of research, which typically have yet to speak to each other. These are

1. the conceptual models for school and system improvement
2. the conceptual models that position students as co-creators of knowledge through youth participation, and
3. the cultural lens through which a place-based perspective is argued to be of essential importance in culturally informed approaches to school improvement.

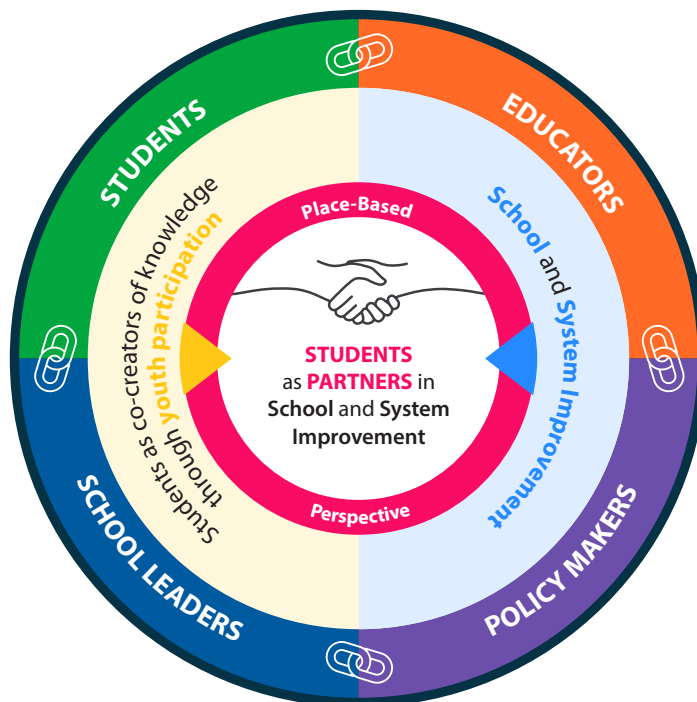
The P⁴ Model seeks to bridge the gap between these bodies of research, exploring the role of a partnership with students as central to whole-of-system improvement (see Figure 1): a partnership that moves beyond traditional voice, participation, agency and empowerment efforts, emphasising the need for active student involvement in shaping their learning

environments and the decisions designed to support their engagement, growth and achievement.

In this work, it became clear that the insights provided by student, teacher and principal commissioners could be grouped in two ways: the conceptual; and those elements of a more technical nature, including guidance and insights that are specific to the design of the Commission itself. Some of these more technical insights recommend how partnership-based activities should be designed and implemented. Conceptual insights often speak to the pre-conditions or culture in which efforts of this nature will need to exist to succeed.

Both authors intend to explore these more technical insights further in a future CSE paper, which will be focused specifically on the factors or ‘active ingredients’ reported to be necessary within a commission, particularly if it is to be successful at the school and network levels.

Figure 1. Bridging the gap between ‘youth participation’ and ‘school and system improvement’



The P⁴ Model: 'A Pedagogy for Student Partnership in School Improvement'

The P⁴ Model (with Students as Partners in the middle) seeks to provide a 'Pedagogy for Student Partnership in School Improvement' (Cleary, 2024). P⁴ is significant, as it refers to the critical role that all partners must play for the partnership to be successful: students, educators, leaders and policymakers. As stated at the start of this paper, and as its name makes explicit, it is a partnership to the power of four.

Learning Commissions are an example of the P⁴ Model being applied in practice.

Students collaborate with teachers and leaders (at the school and system level) to pinpoint and tackle areas identified as a focus for improvement, co-creating knowledge in these settings, addressing real-world problems and innovating together.

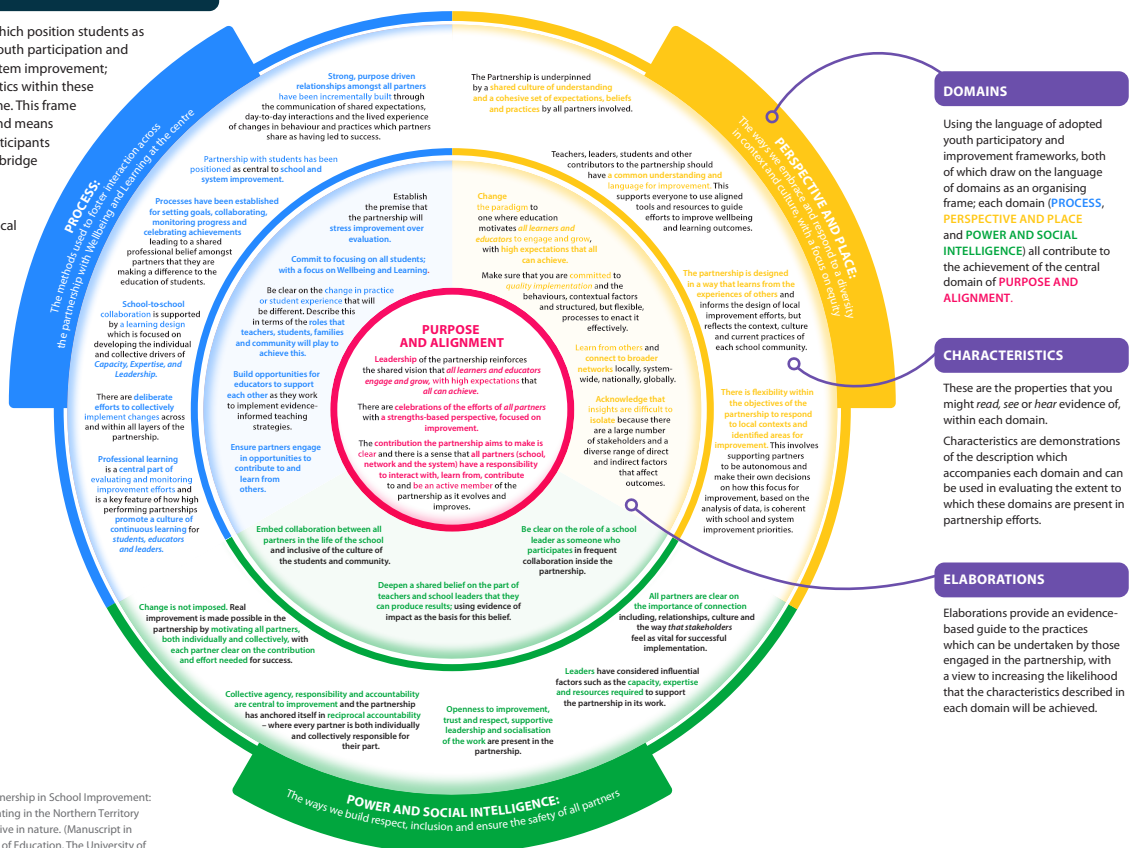
One of the intended features of the P⁴ Model is its scalability, which is fundamental for system success. Whether for a small rural/remote/regional school or a large urban setting, the Model's principles are designed to be applied across settings or at the individual school, network or whole-system level.

Figure 2. The P⁴ Model: Partnership to the power of four

P⁴ MODEL: A PEDAGOGY FOR STUDENT PARTNERSHIP IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Drawing upon conceptual models which position students as co-creators of knowledge through youth participation and those which focus on school and system improvement; P⁴ aligns the intersecting characteristics within these models to provide an additional frame. This frame is intended to provide a language and means of exploring the contributions of participants in this partnership, but also seeks to bridge the gap which exists between these bodies of research.

P⁴ is significant as it refers to the critical role that all partners must play for the partnership to be successful. Students, educators, leaders and policymakers.



Cleary, J. (2024). A Pedagogy for Student Partnership in School Improvement: Factors that students and educators participating in the Northern Territory Learning Commission identify as transformative in nature. (Manuscript in preparation for doctoral dissertation) Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia.

A robust reflection mechanism is integral to the P⁴ Model. This system allows for an ongoing exchange of ideas between students and educators, ensuring student input is heard and acted upon. The Model is not just about improving educational outcomes; it is about rethinking the role of students in education. By fostering a partnership with students for improvement, the Model seeks to challenge traditional paradigms and advocate for the essential role that students can play for a better and fairer education system for all.

Domains within the P⁴ Model

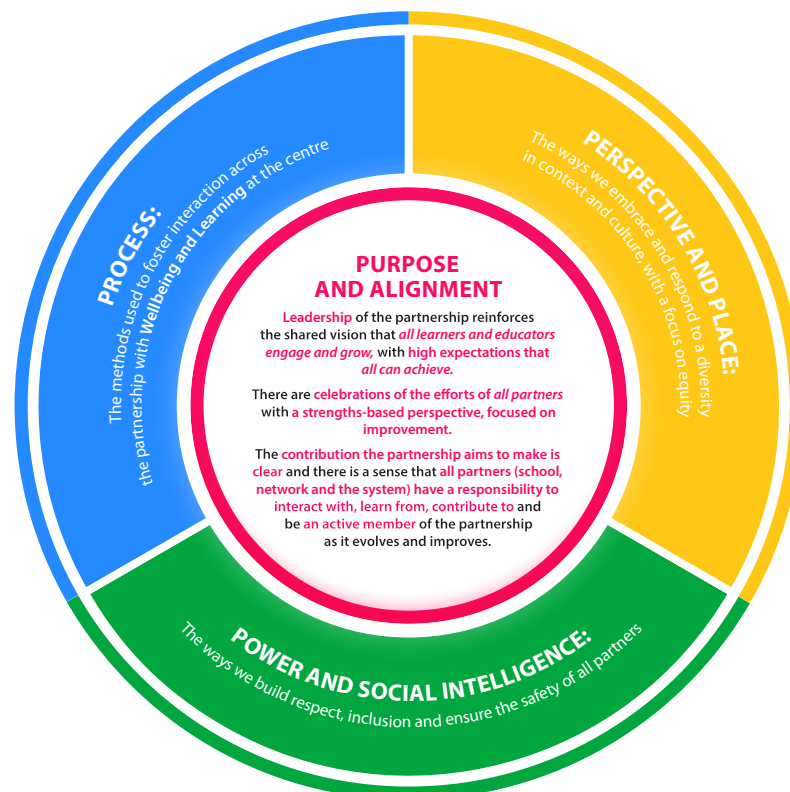
Using the language of adopted youth participatory (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018) and improvement frameworks (ACER, 2017; ACER, 2023; Fullan, 2021), each of which draws on the language of domains as an organising frame, each of the domains of Process, Perspective and

Place, and Power and Social Intelligence contribute to the achievement of the central domain of Purpose and Alignment (Figure 3).

Within the P⁴ Model, each domain includes ‘characteristics’ situated on the outer ring. These characteristics are the properties that you might read, see or hear evidence of, within each domain. Characteristics are also demonstrations of the description that accompanies each domain and can be used by partners to evaluate the extent to which each domain is present in partnership efforts.

In the inner ring of the P⁴ Model, elaborations for each domain have been included. These elaborations provide a guide to the practices that may be undertaken by those engaged in the partnership, to increase the likelihood that the characteristics described in each domain will be achieved.

Figure 3. Domains within the P⁴ Model



The 'Process' domain explores the methods used to foster interaction across the partnership, focusing on wellbeing and learning at the centre. It describes the ways in which purpose-driven relationships are built and the importance of how the partnership is positioned; but also the vital role of processes, learning design, deliberate implementation and a culture of learning for all.

It publicly celebrates the efforts of all partners with a strengths-based perspective and a focus on improvement.

'Perspective and Place' explores how the partnership embraces and responds to diversity in context and culture, with a clear investment in equity at its centre. It describes cohesion in expectations, beliefs and practices, as well as a common language for improvement

shared across the partnership. The domain also reflects on the flexibility required to ensure that, although the partnership may learn from the experiences of others, these learnings must be considered within the context, culture and current practices of each school community.

The 'Power and Social Intelligence' domain explores how partnerships build connection, respect and inclusion, and how they ensure the safety of all partners. The domain describes the need to motivate all partners collectively and individually, ensuring that responsibility and accountability for improvement efforts are shared, as well as the critical role of leaders within the partnership to create the necessary conditions for this reciprocal accountability.

Each of the preceding domains contributes to achieving the domain of 'Purpose and Alignment', which is positioned at the centre of the P⁴ Model. In doing so, the Model presumes that the purpose of the partnership – particularly one that motivates all learners and educators to engage and grow, with high expectations that all can achieve – should inform its design.

Positioning purpose and alignment in the centre is also a reminder that participation is not the aim, but a means to ensure that improvement occurs. Students within the learning commission sometimes ask, 'What has this got to do with learning?', when presented with a range of activities by another commission, which are separate from our shared purpose or not clearly aligned to improving wellbeing and learning for children and young people.

Cahill and Dadvand (2018) also reflect that purpose is strongest when it is collectively generated and shared with young people themselves. They say that 'When young people are co-creators in the framing or the re-shaping of purpose, they can share their ethics, vision and values, and contribute the motivating moral force' (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018, p 248), which drives partnership efforts.

Establishing a clear purpose and sense of alignment early in the partnership is essential. Still, regular health checks and touchpoints, to understand how well these are understood by all partners and reflected in partnership efforts, are critical for any partnership to be meaningfully achieved. This is true at all levels. Continuing to monitor and evolve the partnership's role and purpose but, more importantly, the legacy it intends to create for the learners it is designed to serve, will support its growth and maturity over time.

The partnership's leadership reinforces the shared vision that all learners and educators engage and grow, with high expectations that all can achieve. It publicly celebrates the efforts of all partners with a strengths-based perspective and a focus on improvement.

The contribution the partnership aims to make is clear, and there is a sense that all partners (at the school, network and system level) have a responsibility to interact with, learn from, contribute to and be active members of the partnership as it evolves and improves.

A new role for students

Institutionalising student partnerships: Scalability and sustainability

Systems, schools and educators often have decades of established practices and mindsets that can take time to shift. In our experience, resistance to this work can stem from a need for more understanding regarding what this partnership with students might involve, a reluctance to inquire into or potentially change established practices, or even a belief that the existing system is our best effort. It is challenging to ensure that **all** students have the opportunity to participate meaningfully.

The real point of infusion is institutionalising these partnerships within education systems, weaving student partnerships into the fabric of school and system policies and practices.

– Summer Howarth

It is essential to recognise that schools participating in the NT Learning Commission represent a range of characteristics and features that directly inform their improvement focus each year. These include high levels of geographic dispersion, significant social, economic and educational disadvantage, cultural diversity and the gap between the academic achievement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Student partnerships must engage more than those students who are confident and engaged. The learning design must be carefully tuned for broad scalability while ensuring fidelity, accessibility and engagement for all. Partnerships need to make space and time for the quiet voices and those who might not typically engage or identify as partners. It is critical that these partnerships also represent the stories of students whose educational experiences have led to them becoming

disengaged. Partnerships must deliberately plan and act to ensure those experiences are heard and given due weight.

To tackle these challenges, we foster a culture of respect and inclusivity. This means creating environments where every student feels valued and heard. Educators play a vital role in this transformation. Providing them with professional development opportunities equips them with the tools and understanding to support and champion student partnerships. This includes building capability in facilitation and co-design processes.

It is a dynamic process that evolves with the learning and growth of all involved. While the challenges in student partnerships are real and sometimes daunting, with strategic approaches and a commitment to trust, inclusivity, respect and above all improvement in learning, significant and small (yet powerful) transformations in schools and systems begin to occur.

Sustaining student partnerships requires an ongoing commitment from everyone involved. This means schools must keep communication lines open and ensure students feel their contributions are welcomed and essential. Support structures are crucial, too. This could be anything from having dedicated staff to support the partnership's work to providing platforms where students can voice their concerns and ideas freely. Create an environment where students know they have the backing that they need to make a difference. The real point of infusion is institutionalising these partnerships within education systems, weaving student partnerships into the fabric of school and system policies and practices.

As students graduate or move on, they risk losing valuable knowledge and momentum. In the most recent years of the Learning Commission, a more deliberate cadetship model has emerged. As commissioners hand over their ongoing work and apprentice newer commissioners into the partnership, schools report this as a critical insight for recruiting students into established commission structures.

The real point of infusion is institutionalising these partnerships within education systems, weaving student partnerships into the fabric of school and system policies and practices. When student partnership becomes a part of the school's (and system's) identity, it is more likely to withstand leadership changes or an unexpected shift in priorities.

Not just promising, but necessary – looking ahead

The long-term benefits of student partnerships extend beyond individual classrooms or schools. They ripple out to the entire system and beyond. Students equipped with the skills to collaborate, lead and innovate become adults who can do the same in their professional and personal lives.

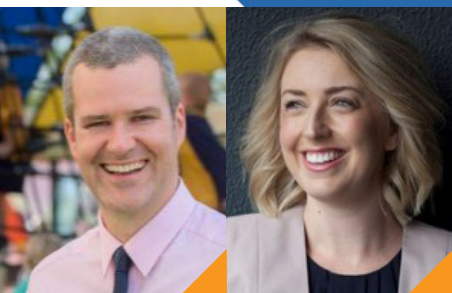
As we scale and adapt, continuous research and evaluation become crucial. What works in one context may not work in another, and the only way to improve student partnerships iteratively is through robust, ongoing evaluation and adaptation. This research should assess the effectiveness of these partnerships in improving academic outcomes and their impact on social skills, emotional wellbeing and long-term engagement with education.

The future of student partnerships in education is not just promising; it is necessary. Reiterating the importance of these partnerships, it is evident that they are not merely nice-to-have additions to our schools and systems, but are crucial for the kind of deep, systemic reform that leads to meaningful, lasting change.

Working together as partners at the decision-making table, students, educators, leaders and policymakers can advocate collectively for hearing student voices, the value this can bring, and the importance of seeing beyond voice, beyond agency, to partnership. We are looking beyond voice and agency to a partnership that leverages not only students' voices but also their expertise and experiences, as those most directly impacted by the decisions that we collectively make.

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JOHN CLEARY AND SUMMER HOWARTH

About the authors

John Cleary is an experienced principal and system executive, leading school and system improvement reform in the Northern Territory (NT) Department of Education, Australia. His experience as an educator stretches from Manchester and London (UK) to some of the most remote schools in the world during his 17 years supporting students and educators across 1.35 million square kilometres of the NT. John has also been recognised as a National Fellow of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (FACEL) and was named as a National Teaching Fellow (Schools Plus) for his work leading improvement in the Katherine Region. He is an advisor and contributor to policy design for organisations at the state, territory and national level, including the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO). John is a Doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, with his work exploring the factors that contribute to a successful partnership with students in leading improvement at the school and system level.

Summer Howarth is a renowned facilitator, educator and learning designer, championing innovation in education across Australia. With extensive experience in every educational jurisdiction, she is a key leader in the development and delivery of strategic initiatives such as the Northern Territory Learning Commission and the National Student Voice Council, positioning students at the heart of system priorities. Summer's work has earned her accolades including the NSW Premier's Award for Best Education Program and the Mumbrella Publishing Award for Best Event. As the director of The Eventful Learning Co, Summer creates transformative learning experiences. She serves on Beyond Blue's National Advisory Council and holds a Paul Harris Fellowship for her contributions to education. With degrees in education and community consultation, she is currently working with the NT, NSW and SA Education Departments, and organisations like the UNSW Gonski Institute for Education, GELP and The King's Trust Group. Summer is dedicated to fostering partnerships between system leaders, teachers and students to drive system reform and improvement.

About the paper

The authors explore the challenges of 'Students as Partners', including the need for building trust and balancing power dynamics, and discuss strategies to sustain these partnerships effectively. They identify potential benefits of this approach, with insights into the future directions for student partnerships in education, understanding why this is not a fleeting trend but a robust approach to educational reform. They introduce the reader to the P⁴ Model (a partnership of students, educators, leaders and policymakers – partnership to the power of four), which provides a framework to support those attempting to foster this partnership with students. They explore practical applications of this model, using examples from their work with the Northern Territory Learning Commission.