Including Voice in Education
Addressing Equity Through Student and Family Voice in Classroom Learning

Incorporating student voice and/or family voice into student learning is a promising strategy for teachers striving to foster culturally responsive classrooms to enhance education access, opportunity, and success for students who are historically marginalized within the pre-kindergarten to grade 12 education systems.[1, 2, 3, 4] Creating culturally responsive classrooms is particularly important during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, as students are facing increased academic and social challenges, and are being disconnected from their traditional learning communities.[5, 6]

Teachers and students can use student voice and family voice strategies to navigate academic and social challenges and connect with their learning communities.

Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms

Teachers who create culturally responsive classrooms use instructional practices that integrate students' knowledge, learning styles, and prior experiences to enhance the effectiveness and relevance of learning.[7]

In designing culturally responsive classrooms, teachers may need to:

- explore their own culture.
- learn about other cultures.
- examine any unconscious biases associated with other cultures.
- understand their student's cultures.[8, 9]

Teachers can use student voice and/or family voice strategies to gain a deeper understanding of students' knowledge, learning styles, and experiences.

Learning About Student Voice and Family Voice

Student voice and family voice can be defined as the ways in which students and/or their families have opportunities to indirectly or directly participate in and influence education decisions that shape students' learning.[10, 11, 12] Teachers can integrate student voice and family voice practices into many aspects of school, including lesson planning, instruction, and classroom management. In an in-person or virtual classroom setting, student voice and family voice practices can range from teachers soliciting feedback on lessons to co-creating lessons with students and/or families.[13, 14]

When using student and/or family voice strategies, it is important for teachers to foster a safe, open environment where all students and families can:

- understand the purpose of sharing their voice.
- authentically share their voice.
- feel that their voice is being heard and will lead to action.
- have multiple and different opportunities to share their voice.[15, 16]

By supporting students and/or families in sharing their voice, teachers can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their students' different cultural, economic, and geographic circumstances and, ultimately, better serve their students.[17]
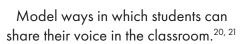
Student Voice Strategies for Teachers

Students as young as nine years old (grade 3 or 4) can begin to develop independence from adults and provide meaningful feedback and insight into classroom instruction and activities.[18] Prior to nine years old, scaffolding student voice strategies, such as modeling behavior, and incorporating family voice may be more appropriate strategies to support student learning. Teachers can try the following introductory strategies for engaging student voice in both in-person and virtual learning classrooms.

Islands represent delicate ecosystems in which organisms must maintain balance. People must live in balance with nature in order for both to flourish. Similarly, classrooms represent learning environments in which the symbiotic relationship between teachers and students allows learning to flourish.

Cultivate a classroom culture that acknowledges and respects all students' experiences.[19]

Explore different ways to solicit student feedback and give students choice during instruction.[22]

Use student-centered learning strategies, such as project-based learning, and community-centered learning strategies, such as place-based learning, to address students' learning needs, interests, aspirations, and cultures.[23, 24]

Model ways in which students can share their voice in the classroom.[20, 21]

Co-create lessons with students to deepen connections to students' experiences, interests, aspirations, and cultures.[25]

Support students in hosting a community gathering to discuss changes in their learning, such as a transition in their learning environment.[26]

Student Voice Strategies for Virtual Learning

Create an online classroom discussion board that fosters a sense of community and enables students to have peer-to-peer exchanges using text, audio, or videos.

Meet with students one-on-one via phone, video, or instant messaging to identify their individual learning needs.

Co-design student-centered assignments where students can demonstrate their learning through a chosen medium, such as text, audio, or video, using common objects in their home.

Provide lessons live and via recording to provide students multiple opportunities to learn based on their schedules and needs.

Support students in organizing virtual meetings or activities to share about their learning experiences.

Student Voice Strategies for In-Person Learning

Use the "I do it, we do it, you do it" model to demonstrate to students multiple ways in which they can share their voice in the classroom.[27]

Collaborate with students to create a co-learning space in the classroom for students to interact with peers and provide lesson content via multiple media.

Incorporate polls into lessons so that students can provide immediate feedback on the lessons and their learning.

Partner with students to identify community challenges that they would like to explore through lessons and assignments.

Co-lead with students at least one activity per lesson that provides opportunities for collaborative learning, group processing, and shared decision making.

Diving Deeper into Student Voice Strategies

The following provides specific ways in which teachers could implement each student voice strategy in their classroom.

After modeling strategies, encourage students to explore different ways in which they feel comfortable sharing their voice.

Actively listen to students as they share their ideas, ask students questions, show students how to navigate differences in opinion, and engage students in conversations about their opinions.

Provide opportunities for students to explore how lessons relate to their experiences and their community.

Be considerate of students' access to resources, such as computers or parent assistance, when designing lessons.

Allow students to adapt lessons based on their resources, needs, and interests.

Clearly communicate any changes and how the changes might impact students.

Collaborate with students to brainstorm how to navigate the change, set expectations for the change, and identify resources for support.
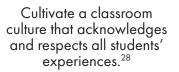
Provide space for students to openly ask questions and share their thoughts, opinions, and concerns about the change.[38]

Check in with students during the change to understand how they are adapting.

Regularly update students on how their questions, thoughts, opinions, and concerns are being addressed.

| Cultivate a classroom culture that acknowledges and respects all students' experiences.[28] | Model ways in which students can share their voice in the classroom.[29, 30] | Explore different ways to solicit student feedback and give students choice during instruction.[31] | Use student-centered learning strategies, such as project-based learning, and community-centered learning strategies, such as place-based learning, to address students' learning needs, interests, aspirations, and cultures.[32, 33] | Co-create lessons with students to deepen connections to students' experiences, interests, aspirations, and cultures.[34] | Support students in hosting a community gathering to discuss changes in their learning, such as a transition in their learning environment.[37] |

Collaborate with students to create classroom norms and expectations.

Co-identify multiple ways for teachers and students to voluntarily share their thoughts and ideas, such as in group settings, one-on-one conversations, or anonymous surveys.

Research students' cultures using reputable sources, such as books, scholarly articles, and government websites, and reaching out to local community-based organizations.

Ask students questions about their preferences, such as how they would like to be addressed. Take extra time to learn how to say students' names.

Offer multiple opportunities per lesson for students to provide feedback.

Collect feedback in diverse ways to ensure that students feel comfortable sharing, such as anonymous forms or group conversations.

Explicitly inform students about how their feedback is being incorporated into instruction.

Empower students to choose content or activities at least once per lesson.

Provide lesson topics to students and invite students to volunteer to co-plan and co-lead a lesson.

Integrate primary sources, such as videos, music, or books that are relevant to students.[35]

Identify multiple media, such as social media, instant messaging, or tactile learning, that students can use when engaging with the content.[36]
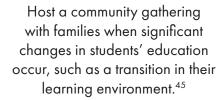
Family Voice Strategies for Teachers

Families are often students' first teachers and have thoughts and ideas about their students' learning, such as whether learning should be teacher-directed or student-centered.[39] How families are engaged in classrooms will depend on the specific context and cultures of the surrounding community. For example, in the Pacific Region, families may be more engaged in a classroom that fosters a sense of community, as community is an important part of many Pacific Island cultures. Teachers can try the following strategies for engaging family voice in both in-person and virtual learning classrooms.

All human cultures have had access to the night sky, but how people connect and make use of the stars depends on specific contexts and cultures. In the context of navigation, people use stars to help guide their paths. While in the context of education, students' families help guide them in their learning.

Create a classroom culture that acknowledges and respects all students' cultures and, consequently, their families' cultures.[40]

Communicate with families regularly and in their first language, if possible.[41]

Set office hours to meet with families in order to learn more about them and their student.[42]

Consider the cultures, backgrounds, and resources of families when designing lessons to ensure that lessons are connected to students' experiences.[43, 44]

Host a community gathering with families when significant changes in students' education occur, such as a transition in their learning environment.[45]

Family Voice Strategies for Virtual Learning

Plan a virtual community gathering with audio and video options where families can discuss changes to their students' learning.

Meet with families via phone, video, or instant messaging to develop deeper relationships and identify their students' learning needs.

Set weekly virtual office hours for families to check in and discuss their students' progress.

Ask families to share strategies that they use to support their students' development and incorporate these strategies into lessons.

Create at least one lesson a week in which families can join their students in virtual learning.

Family Voice Strategies for In-Person Learning

Host family orientations to familiarize them with your classroom and build joint expectations for students' learning.

Set a specific time each week for families to join their students in the classroom for a lesson.

Provide a space in the classroom for families to engage with their students' learning and celebrate their accomplishments.

Offer families an opportunity to learn new knowledge in the classroom, such as how to use classroom student portals, to show how the school can be a learning resource.

Ask families if they would like to meet in their homes or local community to provide a more comfortable environment for getting to know them and their students better.

Diving Deeper into Family Voice Strategies

The following provides specific ways in which teachers could implement each family voice strategy in their classroom.

Ask families which forms of communication (such as email, phone, text, or in-person) work best for them.

Be deliberate about consistently communicating with families about how their students are doing and what is happening in the classroom.

Communicate with families in their first language and/or requested language, and offer translators for in-person communication.[48] Students should not be expected to translate communication for schools.

Research how students' cultures may relate to a concept being taught in classroom.

Ask families to share their knowledge of how a concept may relate to their lived experiences, cultural practices, or traditions.

Incorporate families' knowledge into lessons, and invite family members to co-teach a portion of a lesson, if they are interested and available, to further connect the lesson to students' experiences.

Create a classroom culture that acknowledges and respects all students' cultures and, consequently, their families' cultures.[46]

Communicate with families regularly and in their first language, if possible.[47]

Set office hours to meet with families in order to learn more about them and their student.[49]

Consider the cultures, backgrounds, and resources of families when designing lessons to ensure that lessons are connected to students' experiences.[50, 51]

Host a community gathering with families when significant changes in students' education occur, such as a transition in their learning environment.[52]

Research students' cultures using reputable sources, such as books, scholarly articles, and government websites, and reaching out to local community-based organizations.

Ask families questions about their preferences, such as how they would like to be addressed during conversation.

Provide various ways for families to engage with both the teacher and the classroom in order to ensure that they feel comfortable.

Be conscious of families' availability and strive to offer times that don't conflict with work and childcare schedules.

Suggest alternative times if families are unavailable during offered times.

Be clear about the purpose of meeting and offer a potential agenda of example topics to discuss.

Clearly communicate any changes, how the change might impact students and families, supports available for students and families to navigate the change, and expectations for students and families as they navigate the change.

Provide space for families to openly ask questions and share their thoughts, opinions, and concerns about the change.[53]

After families have time to adjust to the transition, follow up individually to provide space for deeper conversation.

Regularly update families on how their questions, thoughts, opinions, and concerns are being addressed.

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