



Beyond the official language of learning: Teachers engaging with student voice research



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Student voice research challenges teacher ideas about the importance of learning.
- Curriculum documents influences how teachers conceptualise learning and assessment.
- Teachers' understanding of curriculum affects how they engage with student voice.
- The importance of learning is seen differently by students and their teachers.

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ABSTRACT

In student voice research an enduring issue has been how teachers and policy makers act on the views of young people, and how potentially problematic issues that children raise are resolved. This qualitative study within seven New Zealand schools involved teachers reflecting and commenting on previous 'student voice' research on learning. The teachers' initial responses were to use their own frames of curriculum reference to interpret the student views. Teachers used pedagogical and curriculum developments at their own schools to interpret the students' views, and this may become an unintended barrier to hearing and understanding the student voice.

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1. Introduction

Research has shown that student contributions to matters around educational reform significantly improve the intended outcomes for students (Cruddas, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Yonezawa & Jones, 2007). Ranson (2000) identified the importance of a 'pedagogy of voice' when involving ways for students to explore how their views made a difference to understanding their identity as learners. More recently, on the basis of a review of research about student voice an argument has been made to suggest the effects of student participation are more likely to include the impact on life skills, and developing citizenship than say, improvements in academic achievement (Mager & Nowak, 2012). Research has demonstrated however, that attempts to listen to student voice do not guarantee that students are listened to, or their views

incorporated (Draxton, 2012; Mager & Nowak, 2012). Within a New Zealand school context, schools are adopting a student voice agenda, and as teachers have observed, it can be very powerful: "It [student voice] is indeed the major change agent in our school" (Tait & Martin, 2007, p. 39). Even so, there is a reported tendency to focus only on what can be changed, and not what confronts practices especially if the student feedback is challenging. To understand more fully the potential of student voice as a pedagogical tool it is important to explore what happens when the results of research using student voice are presented to teachers.

Learning as a phenomenon is understood differently by teachers and their students, and the views of each are shaped by their respective roles and focus on what is important 'to learn'. Teachers may have their own philosophies about teaching and learning but these are enabled and constrained by mandated curriculum statements and explicit learning outcomes, as teachers are professionally required to support students to meet specified standards. For the learner, their perceived importance of learning is influenced by their own social lives and aspirations, and this affects how they

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approach a learning task, and as shown in earlier research influences their personal goals around learning (Bourke, 2010; Bourke & Loveridge, 2014). Therefore, the importance of learning might be seen on a continuum from simply meeting pre-determined, externally identified targets through to experiencing and learning about life. While not incompatible, this can lead to tensions around what is valued and by whom, and subsequently, what is attended to in the classroom.

This article focuses on the perspectives of teachers when they are presented with findings from earlier research on students' views about the importance of learning. The initial research was conducted when National Standards, a new approach to reporting on student achievement, was introduced in New Zealand schools (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014). Some of the teachers involved in the current study had been the teachers of the students in the original study and others were recruited from similar schools and teaching at the same level.

In this article, first the background to the original and subsequent study is introduced, and the methodology and method of the study are explained. Next, teachers' reactions to, and understandings of these students' views are presented and explored. Of interest, the results portray teachers' desire to engage with the findings from 'student voice research' but their understandings are clouded by their teacher lens, and more specifically, through a mandated curriculum lens.

2. Background to the original and subsequent study

The *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (NZC), revised in 2007, is the guiding document to support teaching and learning in primary schools. It provides the overall vision that young people will "be confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners" (Ministry of Education, 2007). The values are made explicit (excellence; innovation, inquiry, and curiosity; diversity; equity; community and participation; ecological sustainability; integrity and respect). Of direct relevance for teachers are the five key competencies that are integrated throughout nine official learning areas. These key competencies are:

- 1 Thinking
- 2 Using language, symbols, and texts
- 3 Managing self
- 4 Relating to others
- 5 Participating and contributing

In addition the NZC provides an overview of effective pedagogy and explicitly 'sets the direction' for teaching and learning in English-medium New Zealand schools, and is considered a framework rather than a detailed plan. This means that while every school curriculum must be clearly aligned with the intent of this document, schools have considerable flexibility when determining the detail. In doing this, they can draw on a wide range of ideas, resources, and models (Ministry of Education, 2015).

In 2009, when the National Standards were introduced in New Zealand primary schools, the focus on the curriculum areas of reading, writing and mathematics tightened, and subsequently the earlier 'considerable flexibility' for teachers became compromised. The introduction of National Standards is reflective of education policy developments that are often used for accountability purposes. Representative of the global 'audit culture' into which New Zealand is being drawn, where international comparisons are made of students' achievements (Thrupp & White, 2013), the National Standards require teachers to identify whether students are 'well below', 'below', 'at' or 'above' pre-determined standards at each level. Teachers make an overall teacher judgment (OTJ), based on a

range of assessment tasks. The teachers mediate their results about each student's achievement against the National Standard within their schools, rather than premising their judgment on one specific assessment or test. Although the areas identified in National Standards include the curriculum areas of reading, writing and mathematics, personal experience in some schools presented examples where student progress in 'non curricula' areas, such as 'attitude and effort' were being judged by teachers as above, at or below standard.

When the National Standards were introduced, the impact of these on the way young people viewed their learning was the premise of the original study. It explored how 20 Year 4 (14 female and 6 males) and 18 (10 females and 8 male) Year 8 students understood and experienced assessment, and whether the introduction of National Standards influenced the way students think about their learning. The Year 4 students were 7–8 years old and the Year 8 students were 11–12 years old. The children were interviewed individually for between 30 and 45 min using a semi-structured interview. Six months later the children were interviewed again with questions that explored their learning in and out-of-school and followed up issues of interest from the first interview or matters that needed clarifying. The data were coded iteratively, moving backwards and forwards between codes and emerging themes. Agreement about the use of codes and the emergent themes was established through conversations between the researchers throughout the analysis process. Discussions were held three times with a Children's Reference Advisory Group (CRAG) constituting students from another school to inform the initial formulation of questions used in the interviews and to get feedback about the emergent themes and ethical issues that emerged during the research (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014).

Results from this earlier study showed that although students had little awareness of National Standards at that time, they did understand that their learning was being assessed. Those from low decile schools,¹ and in Year 4 were less likely to know about National Standards than those from Year 8 and in higher decile schools. When they did know about National Standards, it was generally in terms of a goal to make them work harder to achieve the standard. For one student it meant "you've been taught the right things, 'cause sometimes I don't really see the point about learning things, but I think it's because it's in the school curriculum" (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014, p. 154). The students also had clear ideas about the importance of learning (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014). Five inter-related themes emerged around the importance of learning and highlighted that students made an important distinction between learning as it is assessed, and learning as they experience it (see Table 1).

The five broad areas identified in the students' responses about the importance of learning included a broader reach than the NZC. As the students spoke about these five areas they revealed the social and cultural influences on their learning. There was an acknowledgement that through inter-generational learning, they facilitate the development of peer relations and family connections. The students talked about 'gaining' something meaningful in terms of economic benefits, social knowledge, understanding, talents and skills, peer relations, family connections.

As a result of this work, we were interested to explore what teachers would make of these themes, and whether these students'

¹ Publicly funded schools in New Zealand currently receive a decile rating (1–10) used by the Ministry of Education to allocate funding. For example, Decile 1 schools are the 10 percent of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities, and are allocated additional funding targeted to support students.

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