

# Young Voice, Big Impact

Teach young children essential skills, such as asking questions and making decisions.

By Kristine Fox



**S**tudent voice for age 3 through grade 2? Aren't these the classrooms where it's challenging to find a moment of silence? Walk into a kindergarten classroom first thing Monday morning and the cacophony of noise flowing out of the classroom can be daunting even for a veteran educator.

Student voice, however, is distinct from merely talking (or shouting). It involves decision-making and requires intentional teaching strategies and opportunities to practice voice skills. In contrast, talking can be blurred out, mindless, and a constant interruption in the classroom.

As educators and researchers continue to recognize the long-term impact of early childhood education and skill development, there remains a need to listen to the insights and experiences of those beginning their formal educational journeys. Student voice encourages our youngest learners to be actively involved in their own learning by asking questions, sharing insights, and providing opinions. Fostering voice skills and opportunities builds a student-centered and student-driven learning environment.

Although research by the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA) shows that student voice impacts the quality and meaningfulness of learning experiences in grade 3-12, student voice for learners from age 3 to grade 2—it is uncharted territory in theory and practice. Students in preschool through second grade are often erroneously viewed as too young to either have a voice or to utilize their voices to develop deeper and richer learning experiences.

To better understand the student voice experiences for students age 3 to grade 2, last year QISA and NAESP partnered to conduct focus groups with 170 students from seven schools across the nation, and to survey 40 teachers, seven administrators, and 85 parents.

### Insights From Students

During focus group sessions, students were eager to share their ideas and opinions on a range of topics. Several older students indicated that the focus groups were the first time they had an opportunity to express their ideas unrelated to a teacher's question. Among the study's findings:

- Almost all students shared their passion and desire to ask questions. Students crave opportunities to ask for clarifications, understandings, and examples. Their seemingly insatiable desire to learn was supported by

their overwhelmingly positive images of learning and school. Students want their voices heard through the questions they ask.

- K-2 students expressed an interest in being listened to by teachers and peers, but they weren't sure why this mattered for learning. They just wanted to share more.
- The younger students defined leadership and decision-making as "following rules and doing what you are told." Accordingly, leaders are peers who can follow directions given by the teacher. "If you can't follow directions, you are not a leader." The concept of voice was not related to being a leader.



One sentiment was abundantly clear: Young learners love their teachers. While students shared a yearning to learn about everything, their reasons for going to school were primarily related to their personal encounters with teachers. Students cared what teachers thought of them, pondered what teachers deem right and wrong behavior, and relished in positive acknowledgment from their teachers. Smiles crept across the students' faces as they shared why they like their teachers. Students used words such as "caring, love, trust, and fun" to describe their teachers. "My teacher wants me to learn no matter what." It became clear that the trusting, caring environment in early elementary classrooms is a culture where voice could flourish if it were a priority.

### Insights From Adults

Despite uncertainty about how to support student voice while also maintaining required curriculum pacing, teachers articulated a desire for giving students voice and more decision-making opportunities. Overall, teachers and

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principals supported the concept of student voice for younger learners, but were hesitant to define what student voice means in a learning environment.

Both teachers and students viewed small-group learning activities (“center time”) as a positive opportunity for choice and voice. This learning experience was noted to provide flexibility and decision-making opportunities. However, even center time is often rushed and prescribed due to the nature of what must be “covered.” Teachers expressed a need for more resources, ideas, and support related to voice and decision-making.

As educators and policymakers strive to create dynamic and meaningful learning experiences for young learners, the role of student voice and decision-making is a vital concern. Schools must consider what specific voice and decision-making skills students need to learn and experience from age 3 to grade 2 to set the foundation for confident, expressive, and meaningful learning that will take them through graduation. These considerations are as critical as, and are in fact related to, positive experiences with core subjects such as reading and mathematics.

### Why It Matters and What Can Be Done

Student voice is a skill as well as a teaching and learning tool for improving school and classroom practice. Younger students must experience myriad voice opportunities and develop skills that support their emerging voices in order to be eager learners and prepared to engage in meaningful partnerships with teachers. The practice and use of student voice for young learners supports the following.

**Student agency.** Agency is present when students have an active role and take charge of what, where, when, and why they learn. Student agency is essential to early learning, and student voice is central to student agency.

**Self-regulation.** Students who genuinely develop their voice learn to take responsibility for their learning. Using one’s voice requires students of all ages to use self-regulation skills when determining when and how to express ideas, thoughts, and opinions.

**Language development and expression.** Advocating for oneself and actively participating in learning are essential components of student voice. Supporting student voice helps build leadership vocabulary as well as opportunities for self-expression.



**Student-centered learning.** Student-centered learning actively engages students in the learning process, and honors their interests, skills, and knowledge. Although a 3-year-old has limited experiences with school, elementary students can explain how they like to learn and what they enjoy learning.

**Personalized learning.** Personalized learning requires teachers to take account of the uniqueness and diversity of all students. It begins when we learn—from the students themselves—who the students are.

**Social-emotional learning.** Teaching students to have a voice includes nurturing emotional self-regulation, empathy, safety, perspective taking, and positive relationships—all hallmarks of social-emotional learning.

### 9 Strategies & Techniques

The benefits of supporting student voice for young learners are clear. Below is a sample of techniques for giving younger students voice opportunities at school.

**1. Establish relationships.** To support student voice, teachers must know students’ interests, prior knowledge, motivations, fears, challenges, and concerns. Knowing your students creates a classroom environment where students feel safe asking questions and making mistakes.

**2. Build necessary skills.** Many students need to learn and practice speaking and listening skills. These skills include how to express an opinion, active listening, and questioning, as well as controlling tone and timing.

**3. Involve students in conferences.** Students of all ages can lead parent conferences and share their work. Conferences provide students an opportunity to practice using their voice

as a way to share ideas and answer questions. Involving students in meetings with adults helps develop their confidence and exposure to the mysterious world of adult decision-making.

**4. Share prior knowledge.** Before beginning any lesson, provide students an opportunity to share their prior knowledge or experiences on the topic. This type of engagement shows students that their voice and experiences matter.

**5. Use Q&As.** Develop fun opportunities for students to ask and answer questions. These activities should be structured so all students can ask questions and not just the vocal few.

**6. Incorporate voice in stories.** While reading stories to students, ask questions related to voice. What do you think the main character is thinking? What questions would you like to ask one of the characters? If you were a character in the book, what would you say? How do you think the character's voice sounds?



**7. Involve students in planning.** Student voice needs opportunities for students to partner with adults. Students can help plan lessons, center activities, or recess games. As they become comfortable and confident partnering with adults, increase the frequency and complexity of the partnerships.

**8. Allow free expression.** Provide free time for students to draw, create, build inventions, or test new ideas. Students need opportunities to develop and test independent thoughts and ideas.




**9. Model listening.** Model listening and then allow students opportunities to listen to each other. It is challenging to use your voice if no one is listening!

### More Than an Add-on

Students want to be heard. They perceive asking questions as the primary avenue for being heard. Given the reality of time and the number of students in a classroom, students need opportunities beyond asking questions to express their ideas, opinions, and concerns.

There are four steps to implementing student voice in your school:

- *Define* student voice with the entire staff.
- *Discuss* the importance of voice with your students. Let them know you want to hear from them and that their ideas matter to you.
- *Decide* upon opportunities for students to make decisions in the classrooms and at the school level.
- *Develop* a student voice plan to teach and nurture student voice in your school.

Teachers, principals, and parents are eager to foster student voice, student leadership, and students' decision-making skills. These efforts, however, must be embedded within everything that teachers and students already do. Developing student voice is not an add-on; it is an integral part of the daily learning environment. 

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