



Who's Afraid of Student Voice

The Challenges of Learning to Listen to and Learn from Student Feedback

Jerusha Conner

Abstract

Student voice has become a popular concept in education; however, little research has examined how teachers learn to solicit student feedback about their teaching. This study explores the cognitive, motivational, and affective challenges teachers encounter or must overcome when beginning to implement student voice practices in their classrooms. Using a mixed-methods study design that pairs open-ended survey questions with in-depth interviews, we find that teachers' reservations about student voice are rooted in four main concerns: fear of losing their authority in the classroom, doubts about students' capacity to respond appropriately to such opportunities, lack of time, and lack of will to change their practice. Case studies reveal further learning challenges as well as key outcomes, including learning to rethink assumptions about students, themselves and their authority, and their instructional practices. These findings suggest that student voice can be a powerful catalyst for teacher learning. Teacher educators who want to help teachers learn to listen to student voice should address the underlying beliefs, doubts, and fears teachers have about this unconventional practice.

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Introduction

Because the success of educational change efforts may depend on whether and how teachers learn to change their practice, the importance of teacher learning has drawn increased attention from funders, policy makers, and researchers in recent years. A robust body of research has demonstrated that teachers can learn to change their instruction through collaborating with their colleagues in teacher learning communities (Barnhart & van Es, 2020) and by receiving feedback from instructional coaching or supervision (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011).

Comparatively little work has considered how teachers might learn and change as a result of feedback from their students. The limited evidence, however, is promising, with studies suggesting that teachers who solicit student feedback or consult with students about their teaching can learn to see students, themselves, and their practice differently (Davison et al., 2016; Demetriou & Wilson, 2010; Rodgers, 2018; Rudduck, 2007). In an effort to help build this knowledge base, this study uses a mixed-methods approach to explore teachers' perceptions of and experiences with soliciting student voice. Specifically, this study asks, What do teachers who support student voice perceive as the main challenges to the practice of effective student voice at the classroom level? How, if at all, do these challenges manifest in teachers' efforts to solicit student voice? How do these experiences shape teacher learning about and from student voice?

A Framework for Understanding the Impact of Student Voice on Teachers

The benefits of student voice are well established by extant research, with clear evidence that student participation in class decision-making can positively affect student outcomes and overall school ethos (Conner, 2020a; Mager & Nowak, 2012; Mitra, 2018). One recent study showed that students who believe more of their teachers listen to their ideas report stronger affective engagement in their classes as well as stronger relationships with their teachers (Conner et al., 2022). Kahne et al. (2022) found that in schools with teachers and administrators whom students rate as more responsive to their critiques, students report higher grades, better attendance, and lower levels of chronic absenteeism. The authors speculated about a "classroom improvement" pathway by which student voice leads to better academic outcomes via improved curriculum or instruction.

Although Mager and Nowak (2012) found insufficient evidence of the effects of participation on teachers in their review of the research on student voice, a short 6 years later, Mitra's (2018) literature review identified "rethinking instruction" and "sparkling teacher learning" as core outcomes of student voice work, along with improved student learning and agency, deeper implementation of reform efforts, and enhanced school culture. Mitra concluded that "a large body of research

documents the value of student voice initiatives improving classroom practice” (p. 475). Several case studies of teachers’ engagement in student voice initiatives have affirmed that initial experiments with soliciting student voice can lead to lasting change in teachers’ practices (Beltramo, 2017; Davison et al., 2016; Kennedy, 2018; Rodgers, 2018).

The mechanisms by which student voice initiatives lead to improved classroom practice remain relatively undertheorized in the literature; however, some evidence suggests that student voice programs can prime teachers to change *how they think about their role in the classroom*, including how they think about issues like authority, expertise, control, and power in the classroom context (Cook-Sather, 2001; Cook-Sather et al., 2015). As they grapple with these issues, teachers may come to conceptualize their position in the classroom differently (Davison et al., 2016). While many scholars of student voice have observed that the authentic and effective enactment of student voice necessarily involves changing power relations between students and teachers, more research is needed to understand *how* teachers learn to shift from a *power over* to a *power with* approach to teaching and learning.

Changing how they think and feel about power sharing in the classroom may require teachers to change *how they think about their students’* abilities to assume greater responsibility for their learning and participate in collective decision-making. In her research on pupil consultation in the United Kingdom, Rudduck (2007) found that this type of student voice work led teachers to develop “a more open perception of young people’s capabilities; the capacity to see the familiar from a different angle, and a readiness to change thinking and practice in light of these perceptions” (p. 599). Similarly, Kennedy (2018) observed that teachers engaged in student voice work experienced a powerful transformation, as they expanded their understanding of the role of young people in society, as well as their perceptions of young people’s capacity and skills. These new ways of thinking about young people led them to change their professional practice to integrate youth voice more intentionally. Learning to trust students has been identified as an important outcome for teachers engaged in student voice practices (Biddle, 2017; Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2007; Rodgers, 2018).

Student voice can also help prepare teachers to change *how they think about their practice* by challenging their underlying assumptions about student learning or effective teaching. Davison and colleagues (2016) found that student voice can surprise teachers. Reflecting on these surprises can prompt teachers to make “modifications to their practice.” One teacher in their study, for example, reported,

The students’ explanations for their lack of participation: fear of getting things wrong; being laughed at by their peers; and the implication that I was intimidating, surprised me. I had believed my students felt comfortable making mistakes. On reflection, I realised that my teaching became more didactic and transmission oriented when I did not get the response I was expecting from students and that this had possibly fostered student passivity and reduced participation. . . . [Now]

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I am consciously reminding my students, before group discussion, that there is no single right answer. . . . I am also checking what advice and feedback students would like from me. Each of these is a new habit that I am trying to embed into my practice. (p. 42)

Student voice can offer teachers a new window onto their practice, helping them to see their pedagogy from a different point of view. This insight may spur them to reconsider their own beliefs about the best instructional methods or assessment strategies. By soliciting and acting upon student voice, teachers can develop a more responsive practice, better tailored to students' needs, interests, and preferences as learners (Beltramo, 2017). Furthermore, based on the evidence about how teachers learn from working collaboratively with one another to review data (Barnhart & van Es, 2020; Datnow & Clark, 2018), it seems likely that teachers who meet to reflect on what they are learning from student voice, how they are acting based on these learnings, and how, collectively, they might better engage with and form relationships with their students can catalyze positive school and classroom culture changes as well.

In addition to generating cognitive and behavioral outcomes for teachers, such as new ways of thinking about their roles in the classroom, their students, and their own instructional practice, student voice can affect teachers through emotional conduits. Teaching is highly emotional and relational work. Research has found that when teachers participate in student voice partnerships, they can become more motivated and inspired in their work (Mitra, 2008). Rudduck (2007), for example, identified "a renewed sense of excitement in teaching" as an outcome highlighted by teachers who were engaged in student voice. Student voice can also help teachers and students to build stronger, more affirming relationships (Bragg, 2007; Mitra, 2018; Voight, 2015), which may be one of the great joys of teaching. Demetriou and Wilson (2010) found that these relationships were particularly helpful for novice teachers who were still finding their professional footing.

Despite a growing research base attesting to its positive corollaries for both students and teachers, opportunities for student voice remain relatively rare in the context of U.S. K–12 schools and classrooms (Conner, 2020b; Mitra et al., 2014). There are many possible explanations for the paucity of student voice, not the least of which is its counternormative character and the entrenched nature of adultism in schools and school systems. Another central reason for its rarity may be that it is hard to do well, as a growing body of research has clarified.

Implementation Challenges of Student Voice

Research has identified many challenges to the effective implementation of student voice practices. Some of these challenges are related to the technical aspects of schooling, including school schedules that do not permit sufficient time for faculty and students to work collaboratively on a sustained effort or existing norms

of participation that limit student leadership to planning pep rallies and prom. In his study of a classroom-based semester-long student voice project, Arthurs (2018) found the “single greatest challenge” (p. 58) to be mandatory participation: Approximately one-third of the students who were assigned to the class demonstrated apathy and resentment at the outset and continued to show little interest in the course. In addition, he found that school structures and schedules presented logistical challenges to his vision for the class. Similarly, Ozer and colleagues (2013) found that a course-based student-led research effort was adversely impacted by enrollment shifts each semester.

Some implementation challenges emerge as the result of faulty conceptions or misunderstandings of student voice. Teachers or administrators who essentialize student voice and conceive of it as monolithic (believing that a few students speak for all students and that students are universally aligned in their views) may fail to solicit or account for a diversity of perspectives. Fielding (2004) has long warned about the potential risk of sidelining students who tend to be quieter, angry, or disengaged, especially those who are from minoritized groups. Students who are less articulate, less confident, or perceived as less able may be marginalized in student voice initiatives (Silva, 2001). Teachers who think of student voice in singular terms may also be surprised or confused when confronted by the heterogeneity of student perspectives (Davison et al., 2016). Another misconception of student voice is that it represents a finished product and that students’ ideas do not need to be further explored or developed. Rodgers (2018) drew attention to the “danger of accepting wholesale what students say, simply because they have been given the chance to say it” (p. 91). She noted that students may not know exactly what they are feeling or thinking in the moment, or they may lack the language necessary to articulate it.

Apart from faulty initial frameworks, the actual practice of student voice can be hampered by a number of factors shaping adult reactions and responses. When students speak, who listens and how are central concerns (Fielding, 2004). Adults who respond enthusiastically but focus more on the performance (e.g., that students are speaking up) than the substance of student voice (e.g., what students are saying) can undermine students’ efforts. Bertrand (2014) has documented how adults react to student voice with “discourses of surprise,” which not only convey adults’ impoverished expectations of students’ capacity but also stymie productive engagement with students’ ideas and recommendations. Bertrand argued that expressing surprise is but another way of dismissing and undercutting students. Especially when confronted with ideas or perspectives they do not want to hear, adults may struggle with how to respond. Even adults who embrace the idea of student voice may slip into “tone policing,” filtering out certain uncomfortable data points because they do not strike the right tone (Biddle & Hufnagel, 2019), or they may find it necessary to reassert their authority and simply reject student recommendations (Evans, 2009; Mitra, 2009), decisions which can be demoralizing to students.

Finally, the practice of effective student voice may be as challenging for students

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as it is for teachers because it is so unfamiliar and counter normative. As Rodgers (2018) observed, students “often say what they assume they are expected to say” (p. 91). Cox and Robinson-Pant (2008) found that when given the opportunity to make decisions, students tended to make decisions that were relatively “safe.” The researchers explained,

They were decisions that were ‘allowable’ within institutional norms around children’s power and within the established practices of the school. For instance, children decided to take some control of the existing reward system, but they did not question the system itself or consider alternatives. (p. 464)

Cultural or class-based norms around trusting authority figures, especially in education, and deferring to their expertise (Lareau, 2003) may also hamper students’ readiness to engage in student voice. Another potential pitfall is that students engaged in student voice efforts may end up replicating existing power hierarchies. Unless they are supported to engage in the work critically, more privileged students might speak for, silence, or even exclude their peers with less privilege (Conner et al., 2016; Mayes et al., 2019; McIntyre et al., 2005; Silva, 2001). This risk is particularly acute for students with learning differences, whose peers may view them through deficit-oriented perspectives.

In the student voice literature, the aforementioned challenges are often described as obstacles or barriers to effective practice. While these challenges are deeply rooted in the culture of schooling, it may be more productive to frame them, not as contextual constraints or as potential hazards to avoid, but as learning opportunities. Insofar as they represent opportunities to shift mind-sets, assumptions, and behavior, they open up possibilities for transformative student and teacher learning.

Methods

This study draws on survey data, individual interviews, and artifact analysis. The survey data are used to identify broad themes across a larger sample of teachers who support and practice student voice, while interview and artifact data are used to construct case studies of individual teachers and to examine their experiences of learning to practice and learn from student voice in greater depth. Although the purpose of this study was exploratory, the mixed-methods design served to enhance the significance of the findings, maximizing our interpretations of the data (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006).

Survey

The survey captured both qualitative and quantitative data, through open-ended questions, yes/no questions, and questions with Likert-type response options. The questions were designed to elicit teachers’ perspectives on student voice and their experiences with it. Most pertinent to this particular inquiry was an open-ended

item toward the end of the survey: “What do you see as other teachers’ in your school main reservations about soliciting student voice?”

Participants were recruited via email, using established teacher networks and snowball sampling techniques, wherein participants were encouraged to share the survey invitation with their colleagues. In recruitment materials, the study was framed as an exploratory study on teachers’ attitudes and approaches toward student voice; therefore teachers who did not have interest in or experience with this topic were unlikely to respond.

Mirroring trends in the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2014), the sample of 55 respondents predominantly consisted of White women. Eighty-six percent of the sample identified as women and 92% as White, with 6% identifying as Asian and 3% as Latina. On other markers, the sample was more diverse. The sample ranged in level of experience, with 8% having taught between 1 and 3 years, 42% between 4 and 10 years, 26% between 11 and 19 years, and 24% 20 or more years. Forty-two percent of the sample taught in high schools, and an equal share worked in elementary schools, while the remaining 16% taught in middle schools. Of the middle and high school sample, 33% taught math, science, or technology courses; 47% taught humanities-oriented courses, including English, art, music, social studies, and foreign language; and the remaining 10% taught elective courses, such as physical education or business.

Case Studies

Ten teachers who identified as novices with regard to their student voice practice were recruited to participate in interviews for this study. The semistructured interview protocol included questions similar to those appearing on the survey, but it allowed interviewers to probe participants’ experiences with student voice in greater depth. As part of the interview, respondents were asked to share and reflect on artifacts of their student voice practice. Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 60 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed.

From among the interview respondents, three teachers were selected as illustrative cases because they represented maximum variation (Yin, 2014). In addition to differences in the grade levels and subject areas the teachers taught and the school contexts in which they were situated, these three cases illuminate different challenges associated with learning to practice and learn from student voice, thereby building on and extending findings from the survey data. These three cases help clarify the points of commonality across heterogeneous examples (Patton, 2015; see Table 1).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative process, involving systematic coding of the qualitative data. I used both open and focused coding techniques to make mean-

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ing of the qualitative data, identifying themes and shared meanings across the responses. A second researcher was enlisted to apply the coding schema. Interrater reliability indicated 85% agreement in the application of the codes; disagreements were resolved through discussion. Several categories of meaning emerged from successive readings of the data and from constant comparison within and across individual cases. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, I engaged in member checking with interested survey respondents as well as with a group of 10 educators who had not participated in the study to see if the propositions rang true (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Their evaluations affirmed the main claims of this study as reasonable.

The present study has several limitations. The primary limitations include the survey sample size coupled with the self-selected nature of respondents. As mentioned, the survey likely undersampled teachers who do not find student voice to be an interesting or compelling topic. Therefore the study should not be read as generalizable to or representative of all teachers. Nonetheless, this study does contribute empirical evidence of teachers' perceptions of the challenges of engaging student voice at the classroom level.

Findings

The survey respondents in this study indicated strong support for student voice. Ninety-five percent reported that they solicit student voice in their classrooms and look favorably upon the trend toward greater student voice in education. Most relied primarily on surveys and class discussions to solicit student voice about their experiences as learners.

Table 1
Teacher Cases

<i>Name</i>	<i>Grade level</i>	<i>Subject area</i>	<i>School type</i>	<i>Years of teaching experience</i>	<i>Main learning challenge</i>
Claire	kindergarten	all	urban, underresourced	6	finding developmentally appropriate tools
Matt	9–12	math	suburban, well resourced	11	taking student voice seriously
Joline	8th grade	social studies	suburban, limited resources	5	making sense of and acting on heterogeneous data

Teachers' Reservations About Student Voice

Although 79% of respondents reported that they discussed their student voice practices with their colleagues, and 85% believed that their colleagues or administrators shared their understanding of what student voice means, survey respondents reported that many of their colleagues did not embrace student voice as enthusiastically as they do. They offered a number of possible explanations for their colleagues' reluctance to engage in the practice. The most common explanations had to do with teachers' fear of losing control and undermining their own authority in the classroom; the possibility that students would not (or were not able) to respond constructively; the lack of time teachers have to cover the required material; and a lack of knowledge, readiness, or will to engage in the practice.

Fears of Undermining Own Authority. Nearly half (47%) of the respondents noted their colleagues' wariness of relinquishing control or giving up "their autonomy in the classroom." For example, one respondent commented that student voice efforts make it "appear that students (and parents) run the school; teacher expertise seems to fall by the wayside." Another echoed, "If teachers give students a voice, it's almost like they are giving up control." Some teachers believed that their colleagues thought that ceding to student demand would compromise their position as an authority figure who should be trusted in the classroom. It would make them look less knowledgeable about how to teach, and it would lead them to appear to be not in command of the classroom. As one respondent said, "they feel that [student voice] activities detract from 'real teaching' and also can usurp their power in the class."

The words "fear," "afraid," "worry," and "scary" appeared in more than one-third of the responses, indicating that student voice poses an emotional challenge to teachers and can seem daunting. Concerns about losing control were most highly indicated, mentioned by 46% of the respondents.

Concerns About Student Capacity and Maturity. The fear of undermining teacher expertise and authority often overlapped with concern that students were not capable of mature reflection on their needs as learners. One teacher wrote,

Some teachers are concerned that utilizing student voice will lead to a sense of entitlement and diminish the perceived authority of the teacher. Occasionally I have also seen an attitude in which teachers feel that students are not aware of their own needs as students or how to meet them, and so, in comparison to teacher knowledge, student voice is somewhat insignificant when it comes to student learning.

Another respondent reflected, "Teachers feel they know what's best for the students." Adulthood, or the view that adults know more and better than children and youths and therefore should act on their behalf, was ascribed to several teachers by their colleagues.

Some teachers believed their colleagues were concerned that students would

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hijack a conversation and use the time unproductively. As one respondent put it, “student voice may sometimes go on tangents, therefore using up most of class time.” It could come to feel like wasted time. Another felt that although “most, or all,” of her colleagues were open to soliciting student voice, she offered “a caveat that we would not want it to get out of control.” The potential risk that students would derail a class or use “student voice as . . . an opportunity to whine and make excuses” loomed large for some respondents.

Still other respondents felt their colleagues questioned the legitimacy of student insights. One respondent asked, “Are kids really mature enough to take responsibility for their learning?” An elementary school teacher simply wrote that her colleagues “don’t believe it is developmentally appropriate.” A third respondent suspected her colleagues were “afraid that students will give positive feedback to easy teachers” and that therefore student voice would simply lead to a popularity contest, rather than a substantive agenda for change.

Lack of Time. Apart from the perception that students would use student voice opportunities unproductively, curricular constraints and the lack of time to diverge from planned lessons surfaced as very real concerns for a number of respondents. The lack of time emerged as the second most common theme in the responses. One teacher explained, “Teachers are stressed out about the fast pace of curriculum calendars and trying to teach all of the appropriate standards; as a result, student voice is not a top priority.” Another teacher shared, “Some teachers are so consumed with curriculum deadlines, they leave little to no room for student voice.” Similarly, a third reflected that her colleagues “may be too tied to the prescribed curriculum” to identify opportunities for student voice. While “time constraints due to scope and sequence” posed a significant obstacle, the challenge of finding time was exacerbated by the pressure teachers felt to cover the curriculum in the context of high-stakes testing. One respondent explained, “I think they may worry about not covering the required subjects and lessons when they do [solicit student voice]. There is also an added layer of pressure in the testing grades (third grade and on) because teachers have to make sure their students have a specific set of skills to take these tests.”

Student voice was perceived not only as potentially taking time away from the requisite curriculum but also as adding “more work” to teachers’ plates. Some respondents indicated that because student voice is “time consuming to develop,” their colleagues might balk at the prospect of “extra work.” Teachers already have so many responsibilities that adding another may feel untenable. It is certainly understandable that overworked teachers, under pressure to raise student test scores, may be wary of engaging in a practice that feels at once discretionary, time intensive, and potentially risky.

Lack of Motivation. Teachers also rooted their colleagues’ reluctance to make time for student voice in a lack of knowledge, a lack of curiosity, a lack of emotional readiness, or a lack of will to change their practice in response to student voice.

Some teachers presumed that their colleagues did not know how to solicit student voice. They had not been taught effective techniques either for inviting or responding to student voice. Either they lacked the know-how, or it had simply never occurred to them to engage students in these ways. For example, one respondent shared, “Many teachers do not know how to appropriately include it.” Another suggested, “Teachers are not always sure how to solicit student voice.”

Some respondents wondered if their colleagues were simply disinclined to hear what their students felt or thought about their learning experiences: “Perhaps the teacher doesn’t really care to know.” While the lack of interest or curiosity may be one explanation for a lack of motivation, another might be fear of being hurt or challenged by students’ responses.

A lack of emotional readiness was identified by a handful of respondents as a potential root cause of teachers’ reluctance to solicit student voice. A couple of respondents observed that their colleagues would not know what to do with the results if they did seek student voice. As one put it, “they feel ill-equipped to deal with some opinions or feelings that might be expressed.” Another respondent offered, “Sometimes I think teachers have pride that gets in the way of soliciting student voice—it is a scary concern as a teacher to open yourself up to criticism.” Inviting student feedback does require teachers to be vulnerable or open to critique, and not all teachers may have the confidence to expose themselves and their instructional practices in this way.

Still other explanations proffered had to do with teachers’ unwillingness to change their practice. One respondent conjectured that her colleagues “may be afraid that if they solicit student voice, they may be forced to make many changes to the way they conduct their classroom.” Some described their colleagues as “stuck in their ways” or showing an “it’s my way or the highway” attitude. One respondent stated bluntly, “There are some I teach with who will not change their methods, even if they are proven more effective for student learning through research.” Another reflected, “Many teachers will solicit feedback but not use it. I’m not sure if it’s because they are unwilling to change, don’t value student opinion, or think their ideas are better, but I find that this happens often.”

It is important to stress that the reasons teachers offered for their colleagues’ reticence about student voice were assumptions, based on what they had seen or heard from their colleagues. While these data help illuminate some of the roadblocks that may stymie teachers’ adoption of student voice work in their classrooms in the first place, other challenges arise when teachers actually begin the work. Teachers’ firsthand experiences with these challenges emerged in the interviews, alongside teachers’ reflections on how they learned and changed as a result of confronting these difficulties.

**Cases of Teachers Learning to Overcome
the Challenges of Student Voice Practice**

Three cases were selected for presentation because they illuminate different types of challenges teachers encounter when they decide to use student voice in their classrooms and different learning outcomes and trajectories. While Claire, a kindergarten teacher, had to grapple with the developmental appropriateness of soliciting the voices of very young learners, Matt was initially dubious that his high school students would take the opportunity seriously. He also struggled with the possibility of compromising his authority in the classroom. Finally, Joline, who, unlike Matt and Claire, was already deeply committed to using student voice, faced challenges associated with making sense of discrepant and heterogeneous student views. All three were surprised by what they learned from their students, and all three identified ways they could adjust their practice as a result. Student voice helped Claire to see her students differently, Matt to reconsider his power over grading, and Joline to rethink two instructional practices.

Claire: Learning to Find Developmentally Appropriate Tools and Revisit Assumptions About Students. A kindergarten teacher in an urban school, serving low-income students, Claire was initially skeptical that student voice practices would be developmentally appropriate for her young learners. She admitted, “I questioned whether or not my students would be able to handle it.” Confirming her fears, her initial attempt to solicit student feedback did not go well. She developed a short-form questionnaire with smiley faces and frowning faces for students to circle in response to the prompts she read aloud. She recalled, “Surprisingly, what I thought to be an easy, straightforward questionnaire was confusing for the students, and they had a hard time with it. When I reflected on why this was, I realized that it was because the students lacked familiarity with these kinds of assessments.” Claire reminded herself that standardized testing preparation did not begin until second grade and so students were inexperienced with the format.

Undeterred, Claire decided to revamp: “I thought more in detail about what my students were familiar with, what they liked to do, and what they were capable of doing in the classroom.” This reflection led her to conclude that

a combination of the open form of writing and creative approach would be best in collecting student voice data. My reasoning was because at this point in the year, my kindergarteners . . . [were doing] a lot of writing and illustrating as part of their curriculum.

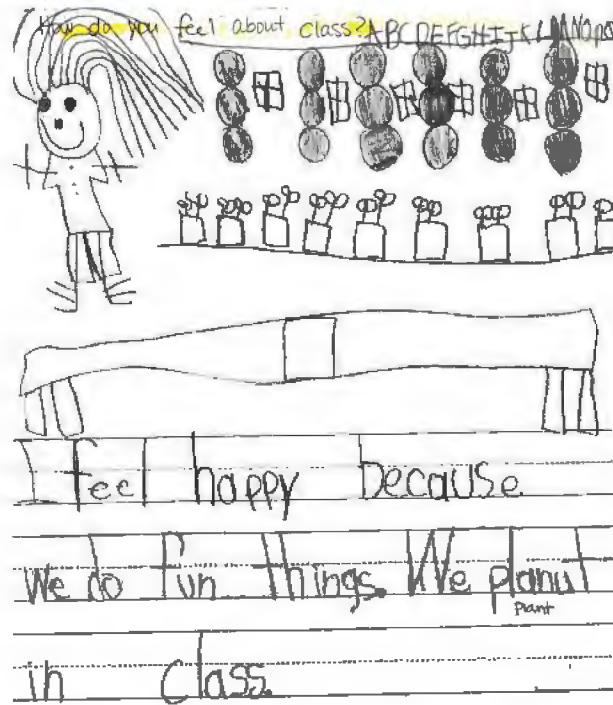
She believed that giving them a template with which they were already familiar “would produce more honest answers about how they felt in the classroom and what they thought would improve it.” Accordingly, she gave her students a sheet of paper with a box at the top for illustration and a few lines to write at the bottom. On one side of the paper, she wrote the prompt, “What do you like in class?” On the

other side, she wrote, “What would make learning better?” (see Figures 1 and 2). Claire recalled that her students “knew what to do and went straight into answering the questions.”

After collecting the students’ sheets, she engaged in systematic analysis. Claire felt affirmed by her students’ responses to the prompt “What do you like in class?” She found that “students felt ‘happy’ or ‘good’ about being in the class because they enjoyed the activities.” Although the students did not use the language of “experiential and differentiated” learning, Claire felt that their responses tracked with her efforts to create such learning experiences. This knowledge made her feel even more committed to continuing these pedagogies and even to “find[ing] more activities to incorporate into the unit themes.”

Although the students’ responses on the front of the sheets were validating for Claire, some of their responses to the question “What would make learning better?” surprised her and prompted her to rethink her assumptions about her students as well as her practice. Several students wrote about wanting more time to work (to read or to write) on their own. She reflected,

Figure 1
Sample kindergarten student response to “How do you feel about class?”



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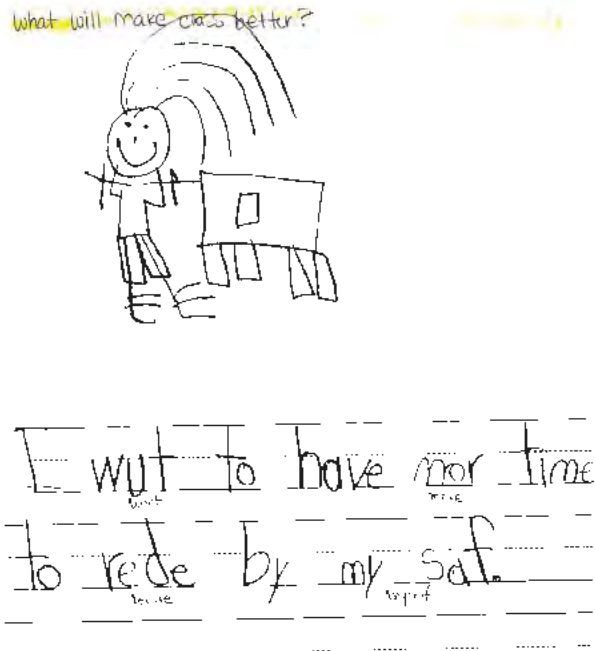
It was eye opening to read that the students wanted to be more independent. In the beginning of the year, my students required a lot of guided direction because it was their first experience in a school setting. . . . As my students grew, somewhere along the way I failed to take a moment to stop and see how much they had truly grown. . . . We always do activities, lessons, and experiments as a whole group or small group. Now, I see that my students need experience in doing some of those things on their own. I plan on giving them the option of choosing projects that they can work on individually either in class or at home.

Claire believes that without seeing the data attesting to students' desires for greater independence, she would not have thought to make this change to the class learning activities or assignments. She repeatedly described the student voice data as revelatory and "eye opening."

Another theme that emerged in her analysis of students' ideas for improvement was having a class pet. Students suggested cats, rabbits, and butterflies as possible pets. Although Claire knew that a classroom cat would be a nonstarter "because of allergies," she planned to talk to her administration about other possibilities, such as butterflies or fish. She was moved by the students' desire to "have the responsibility of taking care of them." She also appreciated their suggestions to have "more of

Figure 2

Sample kindergarten student response to "What will make class better?"



the activity learning related to the pets.” Claire recognized how class pets could support science understanding as well as social-emotional learning.

Overall, Claire’s initial foray into student voice work was encouraging. She recalled that “it took some re-working and reflecting to find the most effective tool to collect student voice data,” but she plans to continue using the forms she developed in her future classes, as she recognizes their value in both helping expose her assumptions and engaging students as thought partners.

Matt: Learning to Take Student Voice Seriously and Reconsider Teacher Power. A math teacher at a high-performing suburban high school, Matt works in a district that contractually mandates that he distribute student feedback forms at the end of every school year. The forms cover such areas as quality of instruction, teacher’s enthusiasm and content knowledge, whether the course content is worthwhile, and the difficulty level of the course. Matt viewed these forms dismissively. When asked what, if anything, he hopes to get out of the students’ responses, he replied, “Personally, not much. I just do it because I am told to do it.” He went on to explain, “The admin-drafted form is something I generally give out and collect, but that I don’t take especially seriously.” By the same token, he suspects that students do not take it seriously either because there’s “not enough variability in individual responses,” suggesting that students rush through it without giving it much thought.

To solicit more meaningful student feedback, Matt has developed small surveys, which he usually distributes “at the end of particular units to help me reflect on how the year is going.” He began this practice after experimenting with student voice rather serendipitously one day when a scheduled exam was interrupted by a fire alarm.

Upon returning to the classroom after the alarm, Matt realized that he had no choice but to reschedule the exam for the next day, so he decided to fill the remaining 20 minutes of the period by asking his students to improvise a scene from their classroom. Students eagerly volunteered to portray him, and some offered to serve as students. Matt believed that because they did not take sufficient time to discuss the purpose of the skit, it ended up as “a one-man comedy show” and “roast of the teacher.” Nonetheless, he found it “hysterical,” and he was “amazed at how much of the *little things* [the student impersonating him] picked up from being in my class.”

Although the skit was rather silly, more about style than substance, it was the class discussion that followed the skit that Matt found illuminating. With the skit as the pretext, Matt “asked the students about how they felt the class was run in general—if they were able to or felt comfortable with asking questions and voicing opinions in class.” He recalled,

Students went *much* deeper into this question than I had anticipated, and [we had] a very broad discussion about my teaching style, student engagement in class discussions, and students’ abilities to interact with their learning in my class and in other classes.

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Matt was particularly struck by students' feelings of frustration and "helplessness" with their lack of say in how their grades are calculated. He felt it was too late in the school year to make any changes to his grading policies, but he told his students that he

took their suggestion to heart and next year, I will have a thorough discussion with my students about my grading policy and would be open to making adjustments and/or to offer alternate forms of assessments outside of homework, class work, and exams, if students and I can agree upon these factors as a class.

Matt's experience on the fire drill day convinced him that "it is important to have this type of discussion with *all* of one's classes at some point during the school year." He characterized it as a valuable "bonding experience," which strengthened his relationships with the students in the class.

Matt is now committed to giving out his own feedback forms at the end of each unit to help him reflect on his practice. Nonetheless, he still harbors some reservations about student voice. He admits that he feels "a little nervous that they'll say negative things that may be depressing to read." He also believes class discussions may only be appropriate for certain classes. He cites his third period Algebra 2 class as an example. Because this class "contains several students who have had behavior problems and who have disrespected me in many ways throughout the school year," he believes "that particular class is better off having individual interviews in lieu of a full-class discussion" to share student perspectives and feedback on improvements to the class. Matt's adaptation suggests that he remains dubious of some students' capacity to rise to the occasion, if he were to solicit their voices publicly.

Joline: Learning to Make Sense of Discordant Data and Rethink Practice.

Ever since she began teaching 5 years ago, Joline, a high school social studies teacher, has been committed to soliciting student feedback several times throughout the school year. She explained how these practices were modeled by her cooperating teacher during her student teaching practicum. This teacher

emphasized the importance of hearing students' thoughts and ideas and then incorporating that feedback into my teaching. This has been significant in my growth as an educator and also my students' growth as learners. One of my priorities as a teacher is to make sure my students feel that their thoughts, opinions, and ideas are heard and valued at school and while in my classroom.

Even though she regularly invites student feedback, Joline admits that it is not always easy. She offered a recent experience by way of example. Joline chose to disseminate a short survey to two of her classes, both of which are cotaught classes and include 26 students. She explained, "I am always looking to find new strategies and activities to try with them to make their experiences at school as enjoyable as possible." On the survey, Joline presented the students in the two classes with a list of the various pedagogical practices she uses and asked them to

rate each on frequency (how often she uses it in their class on a scale of 1–5) and effectiveness (how effective this instructional approach is to their learning on a scale of 1–5.) She hoped that the data would offer a new window into her practice.

At first blush, the data did not indicate any conclusive findings or clear course of action. Joline recalled, “After tallying the numbers from both classes, I was first overwhelmed with what looked like inconsistencies to me.” The “lack of patterns” left her “wondering how I would use this new information from my students.” Eventually, Joline decided to look at each strategy separately, calculating mean scores instead of frequencies. She agreed with students’ assessments of the four strategies she used most frequently, as well as those that they identified as being used more sparingly. The students’ assessments of which strategies were most effective, however, surprised her because they challenged some of her assumptions.

She realized that though she had begun to lecture less frequently, students on average found her mini-lectures to be highly beneficial to their learning. Joline reflected, “I did not think my students in these classes looked engaged while listening and did not seem enthusiastic about [my mini-lectures] overall.” The survey results, however, prompted her to recommit to lecturing more consistently “because surprisingly, a majority of students say they really learn a lot from them.” Eager to probe this finding a little more, Joline followed up and asked the students what makes for an effective mini-lecture. They encouraged her to limit them to 8 minutes so they can maintain their focus, to include visuals as it helps them to remember the information, and to continue to not require them to write, as some students can actually listen to her explanations better when they are not frantically trying to capture notes. With this feedback in mind, Joline decided that she would “continue to tweak my mini-lectures, rather than get rid of them, to help students learn new information.”

The survey data also revealed that students felt they learned a lot when working in groups but that they rarely had the opportunity to do so. Joline explained that she and her coteacher had “struggled with our classes when it comes to structured and effective group work. Our students are very social and talkative . . . and not much gets accomplished.” They had tried “restructuring the activities, chunking the assignments, and scaffolding, but it has not been successful too often. Because of this, we have not done it as frequently as with other classes.” After taking the survey, one of the students approached Joline and proceeded to elaborate on his answers, including recommending that they do more group work.

He said it really helps him to talk to other students about the topics we are learning in order to understand them better. I told him I would take it into consideration and try a group activity the next day, just for him.

True to her word, the next day, Joline explained to her students that she really wanted to try a group activity because of their feedback on the survey. After she reviewed and modeled the purpose of the group activity on primary source material, Joline invited the students to choose their own groups. She noticed that the student

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who had approached her the previous day chose to work with his best friends. Immediately, they got off-task, discussing video games. After a few minutes, Joline pulled him aside and asked him how much he was learning from the group activity:

He smiled and said, "I probably didn't choose the right people to work with, huh?" I smiled and told him it was not too late to change groups. He went back to his friends, apologized for being off-task, and moved his belongings to a different group. He immediately picked up the primary sources and began to actively read.

Joline recalled

I was so proud of this student for recognizing that he was not doing what was best for his learning and taking action to change the situation. A few other students in class decided to change groups because of this same scenario.

Although the group work activity did not unfold perfectly, Joline felt that it marked a step in the right direction, and she was eager to continue to experiment with more group work, framed by reminders to students of the value they placed on it as an effective learning activity.

Joline concluded that the "significant value in the survey" extended beyond the data. She reflected that the survey results "allowed me to grow as a teacher from hearing my students' comments and suggestions." At the same time, the subsequent dialogue it sparked allowed "students to hold themselves accountable and reflect on what helps them to learn better." She plans "to continue to use different surveys within my classroom to not only improve student learning through student voice, but also to use surveys as a better way to engage and create relationships with my students." By inviting students to reflect on not only her teaching but their own learning, and by following up on students' responses, Joline created opportunities for students to partner with her in assuming responsibility for their experiences as learners.

Discussion

This study adds to the literature on the challenges of implementing student voice in the classroom by identifying the impediments teachers perceive and experience when they begin to solicit student voice; by reframing these implementation challenges as learning opportunities; and by illustrating how student voice can help teachers think about their students, themselves, and their practice differently.

Teacher learning has been conceptualized as a multidimensional process, with cognitive, affective, and motivational elements (Korthagen, 2017). Across the four main themes (loss of authority and control; lack of student capacity; lack of time; and lack of knowledge, curiosity, or will to change) that surfaced in the survey, there are cognitive, affective, and motivational elements. Teachers' concerns about losing authority in their classroom speak to cognition and their mental models of what good teaching looks like. The practice of student voice may be incompatible with certain teachers' understandings of their own role and the place of students in the classroom.

Rethinking these notions may be exceedingly difficult without explicit support from preservice supervisors, teacher educators, or mentor teachers and a genuine desire on the part of the teacher to take on this reflective work. Without some reason motivating them, teachers may have little impetus for such reconsideration.

Furthermore, issues of authority in the classroom are charged with emotion. To lose authority feels like a risky and scary proposition to teachers, especially for those whose professional identities hinge on the appearance of a well-managed, well-run classroom. Matt prided himself on the fact that students saw him as more open-minded and flexible in the classroom than other math teachers; however, his reluctance to allow his third period class the opportunity for an open class discussion on teaching and learning suggested that he harbored fears about how students' responses would reflect on him and his efficacy as a teacher. Learning about nontraditional ways to enact or share authority with students, especially students who seem unhappy in the classroom, requires teachers to be motivated to engage cognitively as well as affectively in examining their practice. Teacher educators may be able to prime this motivation by encouraging teachers to think critically about power dynamics in the classroom.

Concerns about student capacity similarly reveal a cognitive problem, with emotional and motivational undercurrents. Teachers have to be motivated to ask not *what are my students' abilities with regard to student voice?* but *what are the conditions I can create to enable them to realize their ability to contribute constructively to conversations about teaching and learning in our classroom?* This question necessitates a reexamination of one's beliefs not just about students but also about teaching and the teacher's role and responsibilities. Although these questions can be explored without a great deal of emotional angst in some situations, as was the case for Claire, when one begins to dig into the root causes of one's fears that students may not be capable of responding appropriately, the learning may be more emotionally charged. For example, if Matt were to explore why his third period class acts out and treats him disrespectfully, he may have to grapple with some assumptions he has about his students as well as feelings students have about him. Learning about one's self in relation to one's beliefs about one's students can therefore be as emotionally as it is cognitively demanding.

Teachers' perceptions of the challenge of a lack of time for student voice are often tied to emotions related to the stress and pressure they feel to cover the curriculum and achieve strong student outcomes, but their lack of motivation to make the time also speaks to a cognitive challenge. *How can teachers learn to weave student voice into the fabric of the class in such a way that it makes the work of teaching and learning more effective and therefore more efficient?* This kind of learning may best come from experience. Joline, for example, found that student voice, both from the survey and the follow-up conversations she had with students, enabled her to improve her mini-lectures and scaffold students in group work that was more productive and purposeful than it had been prior to the survey. Group

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work was no longer “wasted time” in her class. Similarly, Demetriou and Wilson (2010) observed that

the teachers in our research who took the time to listen and invest an emotional rapport with their students, were the teachers who ultimately saved time—through curbing disruptive behavior, instilling discipline, and reaping the rewards of effective and genuine interest in learning. (p. 64)

A fundamental question for teacher educators, then, is how they might help teachers come to see student voice as a time saver and as a key to unlocking optimal student engagement and learning.

Finally, while the lack of knowledge of how to solicit student voice is clearly a cognitive challenge and the lack of emotional readiness for student voice is an emotional challenge, the unwillingness to change one’s practice in response to student voice is simultaneously an emotional, cognitive, and motivational challenge that requires learning new ways of teaching and new ways of relating to students. Teachers who are motivated to learn techniques for soliciting and responding to student voice can learn from mentors, as Joline did, or experiment on their own, as Claire did. Teachers who are ready to try using student voice in their classrooms can learn from taking risks and opening themselves up to criticism, as Matt good-naturedly did when he invited students to impersonate him. Vulnerability and humility can be learned, and teachers can learn to become comfortable with being uncomfortable through repeated practice. Additionally, teacher educators and teacher mentors can create supports and opportunities for this kind of learning by modeling, encouraging, and validating such experimentation.

How to motivate and engage teachers who do not want to change their practice in any way is *the* great challenge facing any teacher educator or professional developer. While there is some thought that simply presenting teachers with data from students may be enough to spark the will to change, Matt’s reflections on the district-mandated feedback form reveal that teachers have reasons at the ready for dismissing such data as invalid, not useful, or irrelevant. Like other forms of professional development, student voice may be most effective when it is specific to the content and context of the class and sustained, and when it calls for active as well as collaborative learning on the part of the teacher (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Embedding student voice as part of a continuous improvement cycle, akin to how formative assessments of students’ socioemotional learning and wellness are used today in many California schools, may help make the practice more sustainable, the learning for teachers richer, and the results for students more impactful. Regardless of whether the student voice practices are part of a systems approach to school improvement, explicitly acknowledging and integrating the legitimate concerns raised and difficulties experienced by teachers in this study may be an important component of any professional development effort intended to help teachers learn to embrace and learn from student voice.

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