

MindMatters Plus: INFO SHEET NO.2

STUDENT VOICE: WHAT DO WE MEAN, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Use: Building Student Capacity

Audience: Executive Team and Student Support Services Teachers

Intent: Promotion/prevention

“I just want a say.”

When we hear that from young people, we might take the statement literally and encourage them to ‘speak out’. However, simply leaving it there doesn’t mean that we are listening ... or hearing them ... or that any action follows. We need to think carefully about what young people mean when they talk about ‘having a say’ and about why we are interested to encourage ‘student voices’. We need also to think about what this means and why this is important for young people with support needs in mental health and wellbeing.

Let’s first draw a distinction between the literal but limited meaning of ‘voice’ and the broader ideas of ‘active participation’ that sit behind that.

The first reason for encouraging student voice is that it enables us to be better informed and to make better decisions. By encouraging young people to provide their perceptions and understandings, we get important information that enables what happens in schools to operate more effectively. In particular, it is important to hear from young people ‘at risk’ - including young people with support needs in mental health and wellbeing – because they provide information and perspectives otherwise hidden from us. That form of ‘student voice’ is all about consultation, and for schools, such consultation is around issues of teaching and learning. (A large UK-based program has explored Consulting Pupils About Teaching and Learning and information on it can be found at: <http://www.consultingpupils.co.uk/>; similar initiatives are occurring in many states of Australia in work with young people.

The voices of young people are powerful in improving our understanding of what is needed for young people’s engagement with school.

The second meaning of ‘voice’ is more extensive; it is about the active participation of young people in making and implementing decisions about their lives, including their lives in schools. The central issue of ‘student voice’ is not one of providing data for others to make decisions, but as integral to encouraging young people’s active participation in shared decisions and consequent action about their own present and futures.

There is a large body of research evidence in areas of education, program development and delivery and in youth and community policy making, about the importance and value of participatory approaches in delivering improved outcomes for young people, either as individuals or as populations.

In particular, active participation is a health-related issue. Evidence from health promotion and prevention fields (including in the areas of resiliency, health and well-being) makes a direct link between participation and individual and societal health. Active participation in decision-making is linked with school engagement and with mental and physical well being, particularly through the development of people with strong self-concepts. When we are considering our responses to young people with support needs in mental health and wellbeing, we make an appropriate health intervention by maximising the power and control that they exert.

Thirdly, ideas about voice and participation are an issue of human rights. Australia is a signatory to the international Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC) and this Convention has a particular focus on the right of young people to participation in decision-making. Such an approach underpins the development of peaceful, tolerant and productive communities.

Finally, voice and participation are important to the work of schools in developing competent, confident and active citizens. School provide opportunities for all young people to learn from experiences of decision-making and action around issues that matter to them and to their community. They grow as citizens who believe they have value, who work productively with others and are able to ‘make a difference’.

The strongly articulated voices and active participation of young people are both powerful aspects of youth development and growth.



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Towards a framework for ‘student voice’

A consistent framework linking education, health and wellbeing has emerged strongly over the last 15 years. This guides how we build and support positive roles for young people through schools.

- In this framework, educational studies tell us that student engagement and motivation to learn depends on being:
- in control of learning (i.e. having significant input to rules and procedures, establishing learning goals and tasks, deciding how to work);
- competent (investigating and responding to issues of survival and quality of life, solving real problems, creating real products); and
- connected with others (learning cooperatively and collaboratively, and having peer support, community linkages and mutual respect).

Similarly, health studies tell us of three central and inter-related factors in the development of strong self-concept:

This research says that active participation that establishes publicly useful roles for young people transcends simply listening to ‘voices’, ‘views’ or ‘perspectives’.

Examples of active student participation have pointed to the need for both governance and curriculum initiatives: development of effective student councils that take part in school decision-making, negotiation of learning and teaching with students, and curriculum approaches that engage students with addressing real and authentic issues.

Towards inclusive ‘student voice’

These reasons for encouraging and supporting student voices and for enabling student participation in decision-making and action are important for all students. These are health and well being issues for all. They are not just for some students who are already empowered to speak up or able to be involved as active participants. We need to be continually searching for ways that include all students – just as we search for ways in which all students may learn and experience success.

In particular we need to be asking and analysing: who gets to speak? Whose voices are heard? What are they allowed or encouraged to speak about? What prevents other voices from being heard? How do we enable all students to link voice and action?

These questions have particular relevance for the experience of young people with support needs in mental health and wellbeing. What is known – from them - about their experiences? How are they supported to become active participants in their educational and wider lives? These are not simply issues of our understanding, or of effective program making, or of rights; they are important health issues. They may even be life and death issues for some of these young people.

Relevant learning MindMatters Plus initiative:

“Involving students as partners in mental health promotion increases their understanding of mental health and their motivation and skills for supporting their peers.”

http://mmplus.agca.com.au/key_learnings.php

References:
Holdsworth .R and Blanchard, M. Unpublished discussion paper “Unheard voices”
http://mmplus.agca.com.au/studeng_unheard_voices.php