FORUM

Ontario's Student Voice Initiative

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ABSTRACT This article describes in some detail aspects of the Student Voice initiative funded and championed by Ontario's Ministry of Education since 2008. The project enables thousands of students to make their voices heard in meaningful ways and to participate in student-led research. Some students from grades 7 to 12 become members of the Student Advisory Council to the Minister for Education, and meet with the Minister twice a year to help inform education policy and spark new thinking.

Although I had been an engaged and passionate teacher for many years, it wasn't until 2000 that my learning truly began. My principal had asked me to implement an alternative program for senior high school students who were in credit deficit and not on track for earning their high school diploma. The goal was to provide a different experience for these students who began school each year full of hope, only to drop out a month or two later, having made yet another false start.

Mike was to be a student in my new program. We had talked briefly by telephone the Friday before the last weekend of summer, each of us positive and hopeful about the year ahead. Twenty-four hours later, Mike was dead, having lost his life sprinting across four lanes of traffic, late on Saturday night. He was 16.

When you come face to face with the grief of young people, their families and the school community, lives are changed, mine included. Mike's death led to a seismic shift in the student/teacher relationship in our alternative class. Talking mattered; listening mattered more. Together we created an integrated project-based learning environment with a strong experiential learning component including outward bound expeditions and cooperative education work placements. Student voice resounded in our classroom. Mike's silenced voice was the loudest of all.

Ontario's Ministry of Education was examining the destinations of secondary school students and finding out that only 68% of its high school students were earning a diploma (King et al, 2005). Research based on the

Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicated that between 20% and 25% of North American students, even those with good academic outcomes, lacked a strong sense of belonging at school (Willms, 2003, p. 69). The same research suggested that disengaged students were less likely to value these academic outcomes, and in the longer term less likely to undertake further education.

This was not good news to Ontario's policy makers who had set out to create the best education system in the world. In 2003, the government of Ontario embarked on its Student Success strategy intended to increase student achievement, reduce the gaps in student achievement and increase public confidence in publicly funded education. I joined the Student Success team in 2005 as an Education Officer and began my search to learn more about student voice, student participation and student engagement.

My connection with Cambridge University began when I sent an exploratory email to Professor Jean Rudduck and her research associate, Julia Flutter. Jean Rudduck led the Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning (2000-2003) project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Research Programme and was a strong advocate for 'pupil voice'.

My October 2007 email to Julia Flutter began a conversation that continues even now with Cambridge and the international community of Student Voice educational researchers and practitioners connected and inspired by the visionary work of Jean Rudduck.

> Can an education ministry through its actions strengthen the voice
> of students and increase their engagement, sense of belonging and
> active involvement in the social and academic life in school?
> (Minister's Student Advisory Council, 2013)

As a means of gathering ongoing student input to education, in 2008 Ontario launched its Student Voice initiative and set out to find out the answer to this question. I am Team Leader for the Student Voice initiative, which is administered through the Student Success/Learning to 18, Strategic Implementation, Innovation and Support branch. Capacity building for the Student Voice initiative is made possible by the efforts of young people, post-secondary interns, policy advisors, communication officers, ministry senior management and District School Board Student Success leaders. The Minister of Education is the Student Voice initiative's most important champion.

The key goals of Ontario's Student Voice [1] initiative are to:

- Re-engage students and close the gap in achievement by learning more about what helps students learn;
- Ensure that all students feel a sense of belonging and able to participate in decisions impacting on their learning; and
- Involve students meaningfully in articulating what would help to strengthen their belonging in both academic and social learning environments (Bill 52).

These goals would be realized through:

1. *SpeakUp* Projects – funding for student-led projects ($1000).
2. Regional Student Forums – regional forums held across the province to gather students' ideas.
3. Students as Researchers Forums – student–teacher teams are trained in collaborative inquiry and conduct research on questions they have on their learning (e.g. student engagement).
4. Minister's Student Advisory Council (MSAC) – more than 60 diverse voices appointed on the basis of their lived experiences to enable the Minister's access to a range of youth perspectives.

SpeakUp Projects

Over 7000 *SpeakUp* projects have been funded since 2008. Thousands of students from grade 7 to grade 12 have created, applied, implemented and benefited from projects that fall into one of the following categories:

(a) Connect their learning to the real world;
(b) Offer peer-to-peer support;
(c) Student Council and school clubs support;
(d) Student Voice.

Post-project survey data identify strengthened relationships (e.g. peer to peer, peers and educators), expanded connections to peers, school and community, skill development (e.g. teamwork, creativity, communication) and new knowledge as outcomes of the experience. Additionally, *SpeakUp* projects are implemented to connect abstract curricular concepts to real life. Examples of *SpeakUp* projects are available here [2] and on *SpeakUp* Ontario's Facebook page.[3]

The following examples reflect the personal experience of mentors and administrators who have been involved in a student-led project funded by *SpeakUp*.

(i) Behind These Eyes *SpeakUp* Project

> As an artist in residence in education for the Durham District School Board, I loved working with at-risk students in alternative high school settings. There were many significant moments and brilliant projects that came out of that experience but one of the most moving happened with the students in a Women's Studies/Physical Fitness program at Durham Alternative Secondary School in Oshawa, Ontario. Over the course of several weeks, I watched these young women find their creative voices as we worked on various writing prompts and exercises to fill their journals. Their stories were powerful and intensely authentic. Their teachers created a perfect space in which young women could safely share life stories – poems and memoir excerpts that held true nightmares and hopeful

dreams. Over the course of their program, photographer Carla Sinclair captured their faces and designed a full-colour glossy magazine-style publication that showcased their work, their faces and their reality. 'Behind These Eyes' is a rich and stunning testament to the power of first-person narrative that holds a place of honour on my bookshelf. I know for many of those students, it was the first time their life experience had been honoured and that they were given a voice to express it. (Ruth E. Walker, Author, http://www.ruthewalker.ca)

(ii) Speak Your Peace *SpeakUp* Project

'Speak Your Peace' significantly increased student engagement among our gr. 7 and 8 students; there was a great deal of excitement about this project and student participation exceeded our expectations. Last year, educators and administrators from other schools came to observe the project at various stages in the year. Some of those schools are adopting similar strategies and incorporating Spoken Word into their offerings this year. (Vice-principal, October 2013)

Regional Student Forums

It wasn't so much my shock at finding out this existed but it was that this existed at all, that someone would have come up with this already and I wouldn't have known about it. I have been seeking this. (Kieran)

Regional Student Forums are organized across the province. Students gather to discuss ideas and issues on student engagement and how to hear all voices. The examples that follow reflect some of the students' experiences.

Kieran and Ben

Ben emailed the Student Engagement mailbox, which was my first opportunity to learn about his work.

Since the beginning of our high school life 3 years ago, my friend and I have seen a very large problem at our school. The fact that a large portion of the students were coming to school with little to no food, was a serious problem in our view. With our last year, we decided to create a lunch program that gives out free lunches to any student who does not have a lunch that day, or simply could use some extra food. Being such a crucial time in our lives, it is necessary to eat during lunch hours to continue an effective and productive school day. So far, we have been giving out lunches every day for the past 3 weeks serving about 80 people each lunch that consists of

> a grilled cheese sandwich, apples and oranges, a granola bar, and a juice box. We have been surviving off of the student donations that we receive as well as small donations from local bakeries and food stores. (Ben)

I followed up to invite Ben and Kieran to the regional student forum that had been organized within their region. The Open Space Technology format and its organic, self-organizing agenda proved ideal. At the forum, Kieran and Ben talked about their issues, networked and created action plans. Through a focus group held later, both talked about what changed for them as young people who, through their efforts, created a school community that connected and engaged all voices.

> I had a bias against some of the smart kids. They fit the box. I didn't. And there was something wrong with me. Trying to survive like that takes a big toll on you, you start blaming other people, and it is an awful cycle. Talking about it was all I needed to do. Maybe I can't understand a person's disability but I can understand the consequences of that. I can understand the isolation. (Kieran)

Kieran and Ben said the Radicals (i.e. the name they chose for their discussion group) created a space for students who found themselves outside the school's formal leadership structures but with ideas and issues to discuss. Quite a few teachers were initially interested in being a part of it, but it took a while for everyone to understand the purpose of the club and how open-ended it was.

> This isn't to say that we didn't have help from teachers, it was simply a matter of finding one who was willing to be official about it.

The club thrived as a student-led group, took action issues and even found partnerships to ensure all hungry students were fed. On school:

> I am not just a student in the school anymore. I am a person. And that's what has really changed.

> We are just trying to understand the world around us and the people we are sharing it with.

On learning:

> I am not just being talked at. I am having a discussion with them [teachers] over the success criteria. It is not an hour long lecture, it is a discussion. You are challenging their ideas and they are challenging yours.

On self-efficacy:

> I feared not being able to change anything in the world around me. It was so debilitating. I had to test that, to see if we could change our world and we did.

On transitioning to post-secondary:

> I really endured high school. I could not wait for it to be over. I don't want to leave now. I want to have the power that I found here, in society and not through wealth but through connections with people-it is worth so much more than currency. There is nowhere else in the world where people come together and try to expand their understanding.

In their final year of high school and reflecting back on the experience, Kieran and Ben confirmed that their feelings of isolation in school and the classroom had disappeared.

More than 600 secondary school students participated in regional student forums throughout 2010-11. Students explored how student councils can involve all student voices and increase student academic engagement and participation in school life. Their ideas have been gathered and organized into a resource kit. The kit is designed to inspire student councils to connect with more students acknowledging a broader perspective. Student councils can use the materials to help start discussions, share ideas and create action plans to hear and represent more student voices in their school.

Students as Researchers Forums

The Students as Researcher resource written by Michael Fielding and Sara Bragg (Fielding & Bragg, 2003) inspired the ministry to explore the potential of student-led research, beginning with a small pilot project in 2008.

At a 12 May 2008 Student Forum held at the Ministry of Education in Toronto, students were asked: *What barriers lay in the way of achieving greater student engagement in your learning environment? How do you suggest overcoming these obstacles?* They answered:

> [Have students] choose their projects, choose their research …

> … give them more creative projects …

> … Lots of group work across different grades …

> …in my class, they gave us more responsibility …

> We need more interaction where students are teaching each other and even teaching the teacher ... students caring about students.

> The Minister of Education doesn't have a chance to meet with us all the time, so struggling students need to be talked to.

> If people were speaking in their own classroom with peers, this would accomplish more than the provincial committee. Then all the classrooms bring their ideas to a central committee that takes it to [the Minister of Education].

> Ask students what they want to see changed at the school and respond to it.

And they had questions of their own:

> Do we trust a committee to reflect everything that everyone said?

> Not everything works for all situations so do we need a variety of strategies? Are there any other strategies?

> People will choose not to engage; how do you reach these people?

> How do we give different people a chance to engage?

> We need to do more to engage everyone, not just the 'high achievers'. How do we engage across school communities? How do we engage students who are generally not engaged?

> Students have to *be* the diversity they can't just represent it. Even students here today are not fully representative of students. How would you get a fair representation?

Young people who are disengaged may not show up on the ministry's radar using traditional methods. They may not respond to government surveys or volunteer for focus groups led by adult authority figures – but they might respond to peers (Lewis, 2008, p. 5).

In February 2012, the ministry collaborated with a community health centre to pilot the ministry's first Students as Researchers Forum. More than 100 students and thirty teachers (grades 7-12) attended. The Students as Researcher Forum, the Students as Researchers Toolkit, and post-forum supports help Students as Researcher teams conduct ethical social science research involving their peers.

In 2013-14, more than 60 Students as Researcher teams will be conducting collaborative inquiry on questions (e.g. well-being, student engagement, inclusion, mental health, transitions, relationships between engagement and achievement, etc.). In the spring, the first annual Students as Researcher Conference will be organized by the ministry for Students as Researcher teams to gather and share their research questions, findings and

recommendations with their peers, educators, policy makers and educational researchers.

School boards involved in the original pilot have reported that policies, resources and programs have been impacted by the findings of student researchers. Excitement is growing.

Sam, Curtis, Kaylen and Trisha, currently seniors in high school, presented their Students as Researcher findings [4] at the Ontario Educational Research Symposium in February 2013. Sam opened with this statement:

> I'd like to start off this presentation by talking about change. Every person will go through change at one point in their life, whether it's moving from a small town to a city or just transitioning from high school to university or college. Change can be an amazing experience that can help you grow to full potential or change can be a struggle with lifelong consequences. Students as Researchers and the *SpeakUp* program have granted us the opportunity to delve into the topic of change but more specifically the transition that First Nation students, much like ourselves, have experienced and continue to do so today. (Sam, 2012)

Sam, Curtis, Kaylen and Trisha had travelled great distances from their First Nation to attend a publicly funded high school. This transition meant leaving the support of their family and adjusting to a new environment on their own. They wanted to learn more about this topic and created this question: What are the experiences of First Nations students as they transition from their First Nation communities to publicly funded schools?

Their recommendations about the supports (family, school and community) that First Nation students need have led to the organization of their school's first Anishinaabe Olympics as well as other cultural events. Another initiative that began as the result of their research, the Aboriginal Youth Advisory Council (AYAC), is active and membership continues to grow. Two students on AYAC worked with a local college and its senior administration to organize the first Aboriginal Leadership Camp in late August.

The students developed skills, including leadership, communication and advocacy. They discovered new strengths and career paths (e.g. Sam's desire to become an ethno-anthropologist). Sam, Kaylen, Trisha and Curtis have expanded their network of support to include former Prime Ministers, Chiefs of First Nations and the Ontario Minister of Education. Sam closed their presentation by saying:

> You have seen our research and how it affects aboriginal students, culturally and academically. You have seen our plans for the future and how we are going to help change and shape our fellow aboriginal peers' lives for the better by motivating students and helping them feel comfortable in their learning environment.

In May 2013, Sam was appointed to the Minister's Student Advisory Council.

Minister's Student Advisory Council

The Minister's Student Advisory Council includes more than 60 diverse voices from students who are in grades 7 to 12. The council meets directly with the Minister of Education twice a year to provide ideas and input on a variety of educational topics/issues. Members are appointed on the basis of their lived experiences to enable the Minister to have access to a range of youth perspectives. The diversity of this council results in rich perspectives which have informed curriculum, bias-free discipline approaches, career planning resources, approaches to learning in the twenty-first century, mental health resource development and Student Voice materials for peers.

The following perspectives convey the impact the appointment has on some members.

> The Minister's Student Advisory Council has given the opportunity to speak out about my experience as an Ontario student but it has also given me the opportunity to express myself. The members of the Minister's Student Advisory Council are incredibly diverse. We have different outlooks and different ways of thinking due to the diversity that exists. It is this diversity that not only allowed all 60 members to learn many things from each other but also to be able to empathize with each other and to try to see things from each other's perspective. MSAC's diversity allowed the members to be open with each other and to really listen. (Meghan, MSAC 2011)

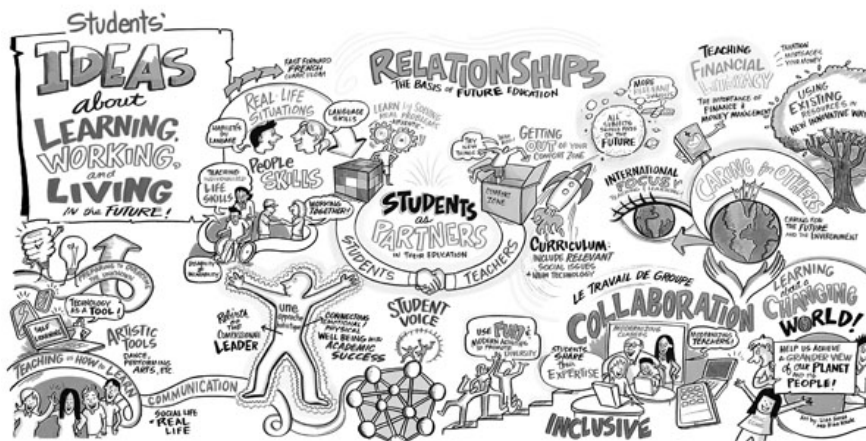MSAC 2013 members share their ideas about what engages them in a video available on YouTube.[5]

Figure 1. Minister's Student Advisory Council 2012: Ideas about learning, working and living in the future. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tGZYkh3-xo

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the ideas discussed by MSAC 2012 members regarding learning, working and living in the twenty-first century.

> The work of Student Voice is primarily to help engage under-involved and disengaged youth – but stretches far beyond that mandate; helping to further the skills, knowledge and passions of every young person involved. There is now a framework for Student Voice which enables young people to independently work within a support system. This initiative helps students run programs, facilitate discussions and conduct research studies to help inform the education system of Ontario; the system that they are so entwined in – the system which is essentially theirs. (Caleb, MSAC 2010)

MSAC cohorts have been the catalyst to developing new resources; [6] they have informed educational policy and sparked new ways of thinking. Over 200 members and former members of the Minister's Student Advisory Council continue to network and offer their advice via their closed Facebook group. MSAC alumni provide mentorship to new cohorts and many continue to take an active role in their school community as student council members, student trustees and beyond high school as engaged citizens.

Figure 2. Minister's Student Advisory Council 2013: vision for Ontario's education system. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/about/consultation.html

Last summer, the 2013 Minister's Student Advisory Council shared their ideas on the future of Ontario's education system. The graphic (see Figure 2) captured MSAC's big ideas. This image was transferred to a large banner and served as the visual backdrop for the provincial consultation that was then under way.

>Can an education ministry through its actions strengthen the voice
>of students and increase their engagement, sense of belonging and
>active involvement in the social and academic life in school?

I think it can. Five years after the launch of the Student Voice Initiative, the term 'student voice' is no longer a rarity. Our education partners eagerly share reports and events about how student voice tools and resources have been used to help in the design of school and board improvement plans. Other provinces (e.g. SpeakOut Alberta) [7] have replicated the initiative or have contacted the ministry to find out the approach we have taken. Directors of Education are paying more attention to advisory councils; school boards and schools are hosting Student Voice conferences involving students not yet experiencing success so that they might learn from them directly on issues such as assessment and evaluation and student engagement.

There's a movement of change in Ontario Education – and it's being led by students.[8] More information can be gained about *SpeakUp* projects and other student voice resources by visiting *SpeakUp* Ontario on Facebook.[9]

Conclusion

In Oldfather's seminal work (1995), students were described as being the only authentic chroniclers of their own experience. Student voice has proven to be a crucial dimension in building a sense of membership, changing teacher-student relationships, and helping to construct an agenda for school improvement that reflects students' experiences and concerns. Ontario has demonstrated its commitment to student voice and has done much to 'enable students to speak with insight and intelligence about how they learn in school' (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007, p. 184). Its ongoing effort will contribute to understanding what works for large systems in terms of embedding a process for engaging student voice in the 'acoustic' of a ministry, district, school or classroom.

Notes

[1] http://ontario.ca/speakup

[2] http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/students/speakup/search.asp

[3] http://www.facebook.com/speakupontario

[4] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWioE-ne1mY&feature=youtu.be

[5] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tGZYkh3-xo

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0W7e70lO_Q

[7] http://www.speakout.alberta.ca/

[8] www.ontario.ca/speakup

[9] www.facebook.com/speakup

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