

Redesigning Schooling

Student impact in the redesigned school



REVISED AUSTRALIAN
EDITION

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Introduction

Student impact is a key part of redesigning schooling, for good reason: change can only be fully realised when all stakeholders are engaged in the process. And no group of stakeholders is more important than the children who will spend 13 years in statutory education.

Student involvement in the management and development of a school was originally described as student voice and subsequently extended to student leadership. This booklet describes a further and yet more ambitious stage: student impact. Our working understanding of student impact is what happens when students have a real impact on their own and others' learning experiences through meaningful student voice and leadership.

Our understanding of student impact is drawn from excellent practice across the country. It builds on previous work on personalising learning in which student voice is seen as one of the nine 'gateways' to achieve personalised learning for every individual student (Hargreaves 2004).

What we are really talking about is any structured activity within a school that engages with students and enables them to have an impact on

their learning, and potentially on the pedagogy and management of the school. Taken at its broadest, this could include the millions of informal, day-to-day interactions between staff and students. As David Hargreaves notes, 'in this sense, all teachers from time to time encourage and are involved in student [impact]' (Hargreaves 2004). However, to distinguish student impact from what is essentially good pedagogy, this booklet will interpret the term as the more formal, planned ways of engaging students to have an impact.

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Part 1

From student voice to student impact

Student voice, leadership or impact?

The term 'student impact' does not reflect a rejection of or departure from earlier notions of student voice and student leadership. It encompasses and extends them.

When engaging students in issues of school redesign, it is crucial that we use a shared language (Mercer 2000). This is discussed in depth in Emma Sims's booklet *Deep learning – 1* (Sims 2006). We should apply such language not only to the content, but also the description of the discussion. How we present activities that engage with students (i.e. whether we term them student voice, leadership or impact) will greatly affect the way in which activities are perceived and the nature of those activities. If we are serious about engaging students in school redesign, we must not necessarily rely on terms that are comfortable or familiar.

© The term 'voice', for instance, might suggest something ultimately passive and potentially hollow. Having a voice does not necessarily indicate that that voice is being listened to or even heard. Moreover, 'voice' could imply that the activity is nothing more than a talking-shop,

with no tangible outcomes. When one looks at the most frequent collocations (words that are commonly used alongside a particular word) of 'voice', words such as 'critical' and 'lone' count highly. If, linguistically, we associate voice with negative feeling – the sense of needing to find a voice – why do we frame activities designed to engage students in this way?

The term 'student voice' became widespread in educational discourse only at the end of the 20th century, when 'a number of educators and social critics noted the exclusion of student voices from conversations about learning, teaching, and schooling, called for a rethinking of this exclusion, and began to take steps toward redressing it' (Cook-Sather 2006, p. 362). The development of formalised student voice gave students a platform from which they could express their views to staff. Such platforms have become common in schools in the last few years, but the activities discussed in this booklet, for which we use the term 'impact', go well beyond student voice.

In the 2000s, the emphasis shifted from student voice to student leadership, with many schools explicitly identifying groups of students as leaders. Schools involved in this movement developed sophisticated and coherent models of student leadership, often with a core executive of student leaders. A number of local grants and projects were set up to support the development of students' leadership skills, such as the New South Wales Government's Youth Opportunities program, which 'funds new projects that support innovative youth leadership and mentoring through time-limited grants' (Office of Communities & Department of Education and Communities 2013).

At a surface level, the term 'leadership' is more positive than the more passive 'voice'. Leadership is seen to be linked closely to emotional intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee 2002) and to certain key

character traits and values. However, the term leadership can be unhelpful in some contexts. Some verbs and nouns that collocate with leadership can be pejorative: ‘battle’; ‘challenge’; ‘assert’.

These words don’t sit easily with popular notions of student leadership or with the personalised learning agenda. And we must ask whether everyone really can be a leader – if everyone is, the term becomes meaningless. It can undoubtedly be off-putting for some students who do not, and do not ever want to, identify as ‘leaders’. Students can have a profound impact in school without necessarily ‘leading’ anything and without displaying any of the characteristics we associate with leaders. If our ambition in redesigning schooling is for every student to be empowered to have an impact and achieve to the best of their ability, then we need a more encompassing term.

We therefore advocate the term ‘student impact’ to describe an overarching, comprehensive understanding of the types of activities that students may be engaged in as part of redesigning schooling. The wide variety of roles through which students can have an impact includes web and app designers, student journalists, peer mentors and educators, associate school leaders, tour guides and student observers. Every member of the student body can have an impact on their learning, or their peers’ learning, without the term becoming meaningless (unlike ‘leader’). And impact relates to outcomes rather than structures – it can become a self-regulating term, helping schools avoid tokenism when engaging students in activities directly relating to their schooling. In principle, a school cannot say its student representative council (SRC) is an example of student impact unless it actually *does* have impact. In our current work with schools, we find the term student impact is increasingly being adopted as a more meaningful and more inclusive term.