

Putting a dent in student voices

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Listening to students' voices in the classroom allows teachers to gain a deeper level of insight into who their students are as learners.

Students' voices may offer potential solutions that help students navigate their learning experiences in the classroom, such as their mathematical identities, relevant contexts and funds of knowledge (González, et.al, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Martin, 2000;). These insights reveal ways for teachers to adapt tasks and instruction to better support students' mathematical understanding and engagement.

[Kentucky's Student Voice Survey](#) (Kentucky Department of Education, 2013) assesses seven constructs of student engagement in the classroom. This survey can be a powerful reflection tool for individual teachers and professional learning communities in supporting the classroom culture and mathematical learning of all students.

In this article, we propose specific strategies for valuing student voice in the classroom that we think could be helpful for teachers. We zoom in on four components from the 6th-12th grade Student Voice Survey: Discipline, Engage, Nurture and Trust (DENT). The numbers in parentheses refer to the specific questions from the survey.

Discipline/Engage

Discipline is closely related to engagement. Simply put, boring lessons lead to misbehaviors. Students who are engaged in what they are learning are interested in the topic and see the content as relevant (17 & 18), and are less likely to exhibit off-task behaviors (15) (Godwin et al., 2013).

One excellent strategy that prioritizes discipline is self- and group-reflections. These can be about behavior, for example, asking students to reflect on what actions *they* exhibited that showed respect for the teacher (12) or behaviors that *their peers* exhibited that aligned with teacher expectations (13).

Importantly, these reflections also can focus on engagement in mathematics. The following prompts, for example, help students focus on being disciplined mathematicians:

- How did I spend my first five minutes [working on the task]?
- What attempts did I make that did/did not work out?
- What statements did I make that helped me/my peers/friends understand the task?
- What will I do the next time to be successful?

Nurture

For us, nurturing involves the many ways teachers help students. Nurturing is critically important, but can go terribly wrong in mathematics classrooms. With good intentions of helping students, we can help too much and thereby take away their productive struggle. Research has found that students learn more when given opportunities to engage in productive struggle (Warshauer, 2015).

We need to think differently about nurturing students. Paraphrasing, expressing students' ideas using similar language, is one strategy teachers can use when nurturing their students. Paraphrasing is a powerful tool because it clarifies that you have heard and correctly interpreted what students are saying.

According to Costa and Garmston (2016), a paraphrase sends the message that you are trying to understand and that you care (19 & 20). Some useful tips for effective paraphrasing (Bay-Williams, McGatha, Wray & Kobett, 2014, p. 14) include:

- Listen with the intention to understand. If you are not fully listening to your students, you will not be able to give an effective paraphrase.
- Offer a paraphrase before asking a question. By starting with a paraphrase, you create a safe and inviting environment.
- Avoid parroting – saying exactly the same thing as your students – as this can come across as mimicking.
- Do not use the word “I” in your paraphrases. Always make the paraphrase about the other person. Instead of saying, “What I hear you saying is that you’re frustrated with this task,” just say, “You’re frustrated with this task.”

Trust

Posing questions is one strategy teachers can use in addressing trust. Trust is a critical component when building positive student-teacher relationships.

Posing questions is something teachers do every day, yet it must be done with care, Barkley (2005) says, “Asking questions is an art – an elegant art” (p. 109). Posing questions sends the message to students that you value their ideas (22) and want them to share their thinking with others (23 & 24).

Wait time is also critical when posing questions (Costa & Garmston, 2016; Kee et al., 2010; Woleck, 2010). Pausing to allow yourself and students time to think sends a message that thinking is important (25). Some useful tips for effective questioning (Bay-Williams, McGatha, Wray & Kobett, 2014, p. 16) include:

- Use plurals in your questions. This indicates the possibility of more than one answer (strategies, outcomes, thoughts).
- Embed tentative language – words such as “might,” “seem” and “some” – to open the conversation to additional possibilities.

- Ask open-ended questions to allow students to express their thinking. Open-ended questions provide the teacher with valuable information about the students' attitudes, beliefs and values.
- Use verbs that will elicit higher-order thinking like *compare, predict, evaluate, summarize* and *prioritize*.

Summary

Effective teaching includes opportunities for each and every student to be heard, elicited and engaged in their mathematics (NCTM, 2014). Student self- and group- reflection, paraphrasing and effective questioning can help us to hear student voices.

Attending to students' voices creates critical opportunities for teachers to have greater access to students' mathematical understanding in the classroom. The strategies offered here are just the beginning to the many ways we can increase our listening to students' voices.

We invite you to make a *dent* in listening to students in your classroom. Use these strategies offered here to engage with your professional learning community in exploring the ways in which your selected strategy might provide more opportunities for student voice. This can help increase your skills at listening to students as a way to support their mathematical learning.

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