How can student voice be integrated in teaching and learning to enhance student engagement?

– An inquiry into educational leadership challenges and possible solutions

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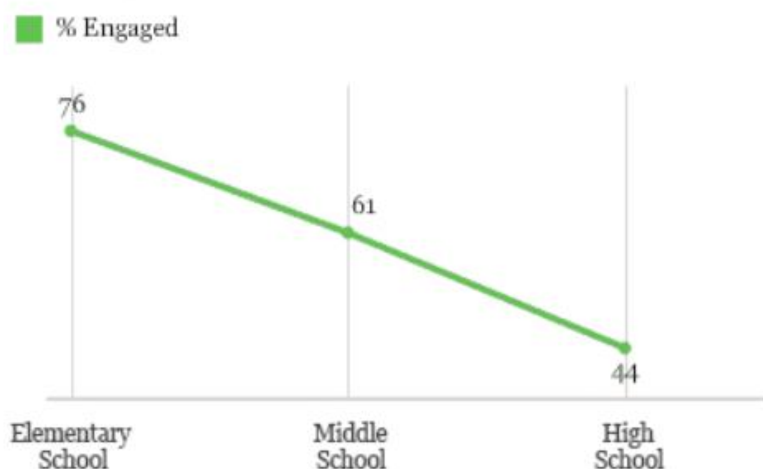
I. Introduction

i. Inquiry background

For any school in any country, it is the educational leaders, such as the principals, practitioners and other stakeholders, who build the culture of the school, form policies and standards and establish a direction for the organisation. According to Helms et. al. (2010) argue, the main objective of an educational leader is to enhance learner achievements; but in the 21st century context, such objectives demand far more complex and organised approaches than just supervising daily operations. Today's educational leaders face unique challenges. One of the most alarming of these is student disengagement, as they progress through their school years from elementary to secondary.

The obvious indicators of student disengagement are student absenteeism and truancy (Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards & Zyngier, 2004). In the US public schools, the national rate of chronic student absenteeism is 16% (Reckmeyer, 2019). Gallup (2012) researches have repeatedly found that the level of student engagement decreases steadily with the number of years they spend in schools. The Gallup student survey in Australia revealed that 45% of students between Years 5–12 were either disengaged or actively disengaged (Gallup, 2018). This is a huge challenge for educational leaders because student engagement is directly linked to their achievement (Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards & Zyngier, 2004). Therefore, today's leaders need to practice transformational leadership, which focuses on improving teachers' efficacy and advanced leadership (Hallinger, 2003).



ii. Inquiry question

A deep look at the literature on the topic points to the fact that student disengagement is increasingly posing a serious problem for educational leaders, who are struggling to keep students engaged so that they achieve adequate and comprehensive learning by the time they graduate. Not only does student engagement increase achievement, it also enhances self-worth in students and sets the stage for lifelong learning (Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards & Zyngier, 2004). To address the issue of student engagement and to improve overall teaching efficacy, many studies have discussed integrating 'student voice' in schools as a possible solution to the problem. That brings us to the inquiry question for this current research as follows:

- In what ways can student voice be integrated into the teaching practices to enhance student engagement?

iii. Importance of the inquiry to my role

As the Head of Learning Area (HoLA), I would be expected to ensure that teaching and learning yield effective results and lead to student achievements. Apart from fulfilling this, I would be required to take decisions on the methods to be used for optimum student learning. However, there is not enough scaffolding in place to support the educational staff in dealing with disengaged students, having behavioural issues. It is evident through literature and research that encouraging student voice has a monumental impact on student engagement and consequently, learning. When teaching is tailored to the needs and interests of individual students, they feel valued and involved, thus improving engagement. Therefore, both professionally and academically, it is important for me to understand the ways in which student voice can be integrated into teaching practices and to what extent it helps in keeping students engaged.

iv. Map of the paper

This paper aims to arrive at the answers to the inquiry question through an extensive literature review. In the following section, it outlines the scope of the research and delineates what this paper does not include. It also talks about the key search terms used to find out relevant literature needed for discussion. It is important to understand how the literature has been analysed for this research and broken into themes. When that is done and the limitations of the research identified, the next section would cover the main literature review of peer-reviewed

journals, academic papers and also, reliable online resources. Finally, in the conclusion, the findings from the review will be summarised and the next steps discussed on the research area.

II. Inquiry Approach

i. Scope of research

The foremost intent of this research is to discover in what ways educators and educational leaders can integrate student voice into their teaching practices to enhance student engagement through the major school years (from elementary to secondary). Therefore, the scope of this project will be to identify literature that talks about student voice integration and how it has been found to help or improve student engagement.

The scope of this report does not include investigating qualitative research techniques like focus group discussions or conducting interviews with people and adopting quantitative techniques like analysing responses from surveys and questionnaires. Instead, the findings and observations purely rest on the varied literature review – both the primary research conducted online for this report and some secondary research sources.

ii. Resources/search terms used

E-books, journals, news articles and websites acted as resources of both primary and secondary research for this research. Reliable educational websites, reports and statistics pertaining to student engagement are reviewed. The main sources are prior research on student voice in the educational domain and how it has been implemented. The search terms used to streamline the literature pool were – “student voice”, “student engagement”, “challenges of educational leaders”, “challenges with disengaged students”, “role of educational leaders in student engagement”, etc.

iii. Analysis approach and constraints

The primary approach is to locate literature that discusses student voice integration in teaching practices. In the process, sub-themes will be identified on student voice integration, such as student voice in classrooms, student voice in research, student voice in teaching/learning, etc.

While researching student voice integration in educational institutions, the research will also, by default, discuss some literature that highlights the importance of student engagement and how and why the same has been affected in recent years. Identifying the root of the problem is deemed essential to this inquiry, along with finding solutions.

The only constraint to the research is that it is purely based on literature and not empirically tested otherwise. Neither are real people from educational institutes interviewed or surveyed to substantiate the extent of student disengagement first hand.

III. Literature Review

In almost all public school settings, 92% of the stakeholders are students, who spend substantial amount of their lives in the school environment (over 12,000 years by senior school) (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Barker, 2018). In spite of that, they are often the most ignored and marginalised elements of the education system, holds Sargeant & Gillett-Swan (2015). The authors noted that education impacts the students the most; yet, their voices are missing from the conversations about the learning environment, the curriculum or any other school-related decision-making. This results in alienation and disengagement as a student progresses through the school years (Mitra & Gross, 2009). 25%-70% of students are found disengaged by the time they reach high school (Marks, 2000; Cothran & Ennis, 2000).

The 'Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People' in Australia (DEEWR 2008) mentions that every Education Minister in the country should endeavour to attain new engagement levels with all participants of the education system, which certainly includes the students. Following this, some Australian states have begun involving students in educational decision-making, allowing them to voice their feelings/concerns and thus enabling them to make a difference to the community (Baroutsis, McGregor & Mills, 2016). New South Wales and Victoria, for example, are undergoing state-based reforms to increase student participation and voice, note Harris & Manatakis (2013). This is a positive move towards student voice initiatives, recognising the ill-effects of student disengagement, which are truancy, low self-image, academic failures and early school drop-outs (Fullan, 2001; Noguera, 2002).

The current research focuses on identifying ways by which student voices can be included in conversations about education. However, to arrive at that, it is essential to understand, albeit briefly, what led to increasing student disengagement in the first place.

i. The 'Why' of Student Disengagement

In one sub-study, Potter and Briggs (2003) had once asked 100 Australian primary-school children about their likes and dislikes about school. Their dislikes included: lack of choice, doing work that bored them, punishment systems, and humiliation from teachers in front of peers. A similar exercise was carried out by Kinder, Kendall and Howarth (2000) in the UK with a higher age-group (11-12 years). They also found that children were primarily disengaged because they felt disrespected by the teachers. Therefore, it is fairly evident that the relationship with teachers and the teachers' attitude towards students are important reasons for student disengagement.

Black (2004) and National Research Council (2004) further observed that schools with low student engagement had a repressive school culture, with teachers working in isolation, allowing little scope for student participation/voice and having weak links with student families. As Smyth (2006) truly pointed, students disengage when they feel that their cultures and lives are trivialised or denigrated through the curriculum or by the school. The conventional, age-old, policy-oriented approach to teaching, combined with unhealthy competition (performative pressures) and irrelevant curricula have increasingly disengaged students (Smyth, 2006). Moreover, as Bron and Veugelers (2014) pointed, many schools also generate disengagement by valuing the dominant cultures over the subordinate cultures and marginalising student voices in the process.

There is empirical evidence from several studies that the solution to the student disengagement problem is to give students a voice. A voice that enables them to express their thoughts/concerns/opinions (Kane & Chimwayange, 2013) and become agents of change in their schools (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Literature suggests that student voices can function at various levels of impact and authority:

a) student voice in classrooms,
b) student voice in research,
c) student voice in teaching/learning and
d) student voice in decision-making.

The list above is incremental in authority from top to bottom.

ii. Student Voice in Classrooms

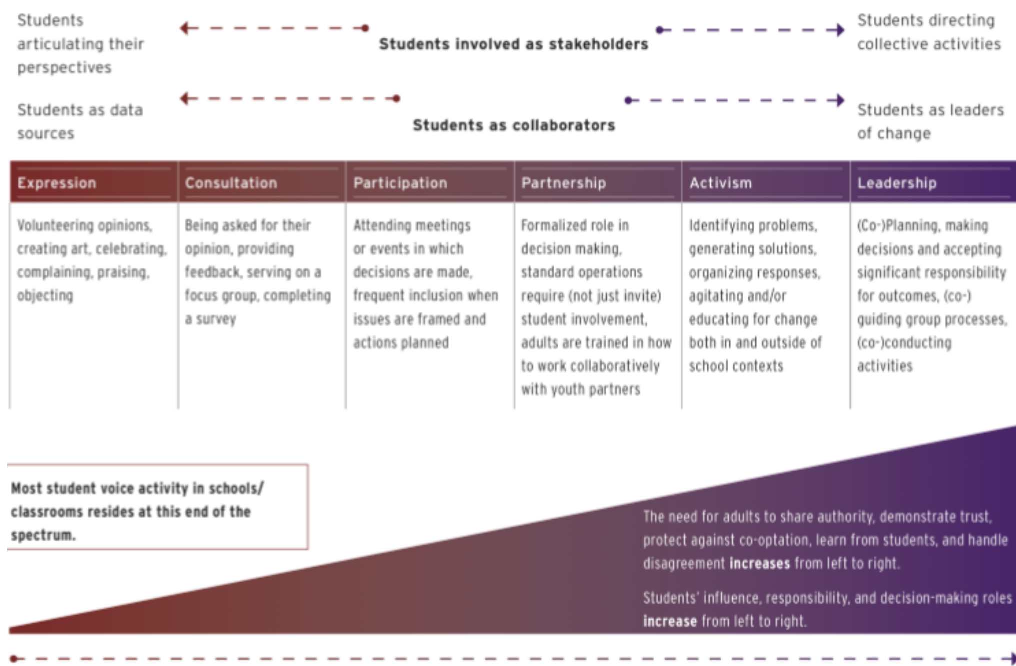
The impact and authority for student voice in classrooms reside at the most basic level of Mitra and Gross' (2009) 'student voice pyramid' (Figure 1). It entails 'being heard'. This effectively means that, at this level, the teachers lend an ear to students' problems and experiences in school (Mitra & Gross, 2009). The students can express opinions, complain, praise or object.

Figure 1. Student Voice Pyramid

Source: Mitra & Gross (2009)

This also aligns with the 'student voice spectrum' provided by Toshalis and Nakkula (2012), in which the researchers described how student voice moves from left to right across the spectrum and gains more power and autonomy (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Student Voice Spectrum



Source: Toshalis & Nakkula (2012)

By this framework, student voice in classroom mostly exists in the ‘expression’ block and partly in the second, ‘consultation’. As the authors suggested, in these blocks, students act as consultants and are not yet empowered stakeholders. They begin to have a pedagogic voice, as Baroutsis, McGregor and Mills (2016) define it as a combination of voice, pedagogy and engagement. Having a pedagogic voice had been found to bind teachers and students into meaningful teaching and learning (Smyth, McInerney, & Fish, 2013; Baroutsis, McGregor & Mills, 2016). When teachers and students co-design the curriculum and make learning relevant in classrooms, as noted Bron and Veugelers (2014), student engagement increases.

However, implementing student voice in classrooms is sometimes more of the system’s performative imperative than a real curriculum shift that is more culturally inclusive and more responsive to the students’ needs, observed Smyth, McInerney, & Fish (2013). The authors indicated that such efforts remain merely tokenistic in nature. These manipulations would not achieve the desired levels of student engagement, held Robinson and Taylor (2007) as well. In order for student voice in classrooms to work well, teachers must allow them ownership, so that they become agents of their own learning. As Schneider (2010) said, educators would need to give up their role of the perceived expert. Only then would classrooms become democratised (Schneider, 2010) and foster student participation. As participation increases, students begin to move right of the ‘student voice spectrum’ towards becoming stakeholders (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

The challenge for educational leaders is to manage the interests of staff who are unwilling to sacrifice control (Smyth, 2006). As Mitra (2018) pointed, teachers are often unwilling to take risks and encourage student voice in unstable situations. Poorly implemented student voice effort can lead to more damage and cause further student disengagement (Mitra, 2018). It is precisely for this reason, many researchers have indicated that it is the educational leader who has the paramount role in establishing the school culture, implementing student voice and leading the reform (Smyth, 2006; Taines, 2014; Carpenter, 2015; Wassenaar & Pearce, 2016). The principal/leader’s role is essential to realise the full potential of student voice (Pautsch, 2010). In her research, Pautsch (2010) clearly concluded that the leader must empower student voice by reforming the school policies and propagating collaboration among teachers and students. The leader must encourage a culture of student voice inclusion to improve classroom instruction, so that students overcome being passive consumers of learning and become active change agents (Barker, 2018).

iii. Student Voice in Research

When students begin to become active change agents in their learning and when educators learn to view students as co-constructors of knowledge, the culture shifts. Student voice moves up the pyramid from 'being heard' to 'collaborating with adults' (Mitra & Gross, 2009). As per Toshalis and Nakkula's (2012) framework, student voice resides in the third and fourth blocks of 'participation' and 'partnership', thus flipping the traditional hierarchical educational model.

Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) argued that students could construct knowledge from their own learning and are developmentally prepared for educational decision-making in collaboration with adults/teachers. This developmental readiness also comes with student age. As Barker (2018) observed, the need for a more active voice increases as a child moves from elementary school to high school. Therefore, while 'student voice in classrooms' is relevant for Year 5-6 students, 'student voice in research' is more viable in older students. Simmons, Graham and Thomas (2015) had similar observations. They found that the oldest students were keener on autonomy and democracy within school settings to be able to initiate change. With adolescence, the children tend to assume higher responsibility and freedom (Bron & Veugelers, 2014). Toshalis and Nakkula (2013) observed in their study that when older children are allowed to participate in the school decisions that affect them directly, they feel empowered and become positive agents of change.

Robinson & Taylor (2012) particularly explored the role of students as researchers, whereby they were empowered to research school-changing processes and provide observation-based knowledge. Students aged 11-16 years interviewed their peers, teachers and the larger school community to understand problem areas and provide solutions. This form of student voice initiatives evidently increased student engagement and agency, as students moved up the Mitra and Gross' (2009) pyramid and Toshalis and Nakkula's (2012) student voice spectrum.

Although the school leaders and local authorities supported the student as researchers project to increase student voice and engagement, there were challenges in this as well. Robinson & Taylor (2012) discussed how adult-child power dimensions subtly crept in even when students were given a voice as researchers, to collaborate with adults and work in partnerships with them. The authors identified this as a 'hidden' domination, whereby teachers ultimately have the power to accept or reject the research knowledge offered by students. Moreover, students also automatically situate themselves in relation to the teachers, whom they are conditioned to

consider more powerful. With that conditioning, the students offer solutions that they know will be approved by the adults/teachers. As Foucault (1980) theorised, hidden domination controlled students' imaginations and crippled the way they acted. So effectively, their voice did not remain fully theirs.

Mayes (2016) and Mitra (2018) also discussed this problem in their studies. Noting that the intent of student voice initiatives is to restructure young-adult relationships and thereby increase student engagement, these authors discussed the adverse effects of a poor implementation that is just tokenistic. When student-teacher relationships work on unequal power dimensions, student voice as researchers do not reach its full potential, they argued.

iv. Student Voice in Teaching/Learning

Student voice in teaching/learning also resides at the middle level of Mitra and Gross' (2009) pyramid and towards 'partnership' and 'activism' of Toshalis and Nakkula's (2012) framework. At this level, students are expected to collaborate actively with adults to initiate change in pedagogic practices and make learning more meaningful and relevant to each learner. As Niemi, Kumpulainen, & Lipponen (2015) observed, the quality of learning and teaching improves when teachers ask for student voice in learning matters, take their feedback and reflect on their individual learning needs. Even Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) concluded that there is a huge potential for improvement in teaching/learning if teachers tapped into the underutilised resource of critical student voice. By critical student voice, the authors indicated student opinions that are unheard of, that challenges existing policies, practices and stereotypes. In that, students actively work with adults to inform pedagogies, classroom instructions, curriculum and culture. Toshalis and Nakkula (2013) and Cushman (2015) found remarkable development in student engagement, motivation and agency when teachers or the leaders take their voice seriously. They become better equipped for the future.

Baroutsis, McGregor and Mills (2016) led one study in an Australian school to understand how student voice utilisation helped improve student learning and civic engagement. Students who were previously considered unteachable in other schools, were found to emerge as self-regulated learners, actively engaged in their learning when their voices were heard and truly acted upon. Then again, Smyth (2005) challenged the input-output factory mentality in one disadvantaged school, where teachers were in control (teacher-driven curriculum), student voice was lacking, emphasis was on learning content than on outcomes, etc. He empowered

the students to create individual learning plans, allowing them a scope to be responsible for their own learning. Punishment was removed and the locus of control moved to the young learners. This paradigm shift – mindfulness of student needs and realities – finally culminated into future-oriented learning where students could choose multiple ways of learning within and outside schools, based on where they want to be.

However, utilising critical student voice often unsettles teachers/adults as they feel their roles threatened with students assuming more prominent decision-making roles or beginning to lead conversations in matters of change. They feel their roles blurred further when student voice is strongly included to enhance instruction, observed Barker (2018). Cushman (2015) also noted similar findings that adults felt uneasy when adolescents were trusted with important decisions on teaching/learning.

v. Student Voice in Decision-Making

Student voice in decision-making is the highest form of empowerment that educational leaders/principals can implement in schools to engage students (Carpenter, 2015; Schechter & Shaked, 2017; Angelle, 2018). This form of voice resides at the topmost level of the student voice pyramid (Mitra & Gross, 2009) and the rightmost blocks of the student voice spectrum ('activism' and 'leadership'). When students are given a voice in decision-making, they are considered capable of functioning with their expertise in all vital decisions of the school (Pautsch, 2010).

As Wassenaar and Pearce (2016) proposed, educational leaders would need to change the mindset of teachers and staff in order to accommodate students' voice in decision-making. The authors maintained that shared and collective leaderships are often more beneficial than decision-making powers resting with one person (the educational leader/principal). Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) were also of similar opinion and believed students to have the necessary problem-solving skills for leading educational reforms/transformations. According to them, student voice in decision-making should include leadership functions such as co-planning, being accountable for outcomes, providing co-guidance in processes, co-designing and co-conducting school undertakings. They also concluded that educational transformations and student engagements become more sustainable when students have a voice in decision-making and take an active role in shared leadership.

However, Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) also pointed to a critical consideration in this regard. Student voice in leadership can only emerge successful as long as the environment around them supports it. The environment would not only include the school leader, but also the educators. Everyone within the educational system would need to accept new forms of interaction, which is based on a relationship of mutual trust, respect and confidence. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) call such relationships "mutually interdependent" (p.175). Basically, therefore, the student agency needs a supportive context. The authors advocate such contexts to achieve positive educational reforms.

In such conducive environments that facilitate shared leadership, students become emotionally and socially competent and remain actively engaged to learning, believed Voight (2015). Voight (2015) further informed that when educators assign more power to the students, these young learners become actively involved in leveraging policy reforms, strengthening classroom relationships and developing individual capabilities to function well in a democratic society.

However, as with all forms of student voice, establishing student voice with a stronger sense of agency is fraught with challenges too. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) observed insecurities among many educators who believed that higher student agency would relinquish their roles. Cushman (2015) observed that teachers often considered students inexperienced and less knowledgeable for participating in shared leadership and decision-making. Ball (2016) noted that sometimes it is a case of teachers fearing being judged as incompetent if students have too much voice and power. These fears and insecurities then automatically restrict their willingness to offer students a higher agency and decision-making power, as pointed Nelson and Charteris (2021).

Having said that, Ball (2016) also observed that these insecurities among teachers are particularly witnessed in performative environments, where there are accountability pressures and where teaching skills are judged by students' learning outcomes. In a performative milieu, teachers are viewed as incapable and unprofessional when students do not achieve desired results (Ball, 2016). But, if teachers are empowered themselves by their institutional leaders, they feel secured and confident to take risks and support student voice initiatives (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Therefore, it boils down to a matter of school culture change, approach change and transformational leadership.

vi. Marginalised Student Voices

This culture change, as a significant part of educational reform, also addresses the issues of marginalised voices in classrooms. Pearce and Wood (2019) brought this issue up in their study and pointed that it is often a challenge to include voices that are generally silenced as they belong to minorities or are looked down upon by hegemonic and coercive systems. Beane and Apple (1999) noted this marginalisation too. They observed that many schools suppressed the voices of students who did not belong to the dominant culture. This dominant culture was the culture formed through ideologies and beliefs of the institutional leader and other senior educators of the system. Students who did not conform to this dominant culture were systematically silenced and excluded from the discourse.

Khalifa, Gooden and Davis (2016) discussed how important it is for educational leaders to propagate a culture of inclusivity, by incorporating culturally sensitive curriculum and culturally responsive instructions in classrooms. Educators needed to be aware so that they do not hurt or denigrate the realities or life experiences of students having different cultural, physical or emotional abilities. Sleeter (2012) pointed to another benefit of inclusivity. He said that the students from the dominant culture also benefitted from learning about other minority (indigenous) cultures through the curriculum. In instances where teachers demonstrated cultural insensitivity, it is the role of educational leaders to challenge such exclusionary behaviours and establish a culture of relationship building, where all voices are heard and acted upon, all lives and communities are respected. Khalifa, Gooden and Davis (2016) even recommended that leaders must not stop at preparing teachers to be culturally sensitive; they must also work towards building a culturally sensitive school environment. This, they argued, can be established by tackling exclusionary actions and attitudes, upholding minority students and their communities and by encouraging student voice in all aspects of education.

IV. Discussion

One thing is certain from the literature review above that the success of student voice integration in schools rests majorly on the educational leaders. They play a pivotal role in reforming educational policies, changing school practices, challenging hierarchical, result-oriented approach to education, establishing new culture of inclusivity and shifting the locus of control from teachers to students. As also validated in many studies, noticeable improvement

in student engagement and learning has always been made possible when talented leaders intervened and drove the culture of change (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Angelle, 2018). It can be concluded from the literature that educational leaders have the potential to unlock latent value in the school's human resources. And when they do, they transform practices. Leaders of traditional, hierarchical systems *tell* what to do, but transformational leaders *ask* what to do in the face of needs and challenges (Louis, et. al., 2010). Therefore, for student voice efforts to flourish and student engagement to rise, leaders will have to believe in shared leadership and young-adult partnerships.

When opinions are solicited from students under such transformational leadership, the students feel valued and trusted. This naturally gives them a higher sense of agency and their participation increases. Higher the participation, stronger their self-worth and readiness to learn and lead. This improved sense of agency puts them in a 'flow state' as theorised by Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, and Shernoff (2003). A flow state, as opposed to robotic learning, is a state of high energy and high skill to cater to high challenges. In this state, engagement is at its best, theorised the authors. Thus, if educational leaders unleash this flow state among students by allowing them to express, consult, participate, partner, collaborate or lead, it is believed that the problem of student disengagement can be substantially alleviated.

The literature also points to the fact that student voice can exist at various levels of authority. Student voice can be in classrooms, as researchers, as decision-makers, etc. There can be marginalised voices too, which await to be included and heard. Student voice can exist as just being heard, where students have no real power to act or change the system. It can also exist as a form of collaboration with teachers/adults, where students have moderate power to work parallel to the educators and observe, research, plan. Student voice can even exist in stronger forms with higher stakes, where students are empowered to take decisions and lead the change.

The levels of authority is in keeping with the age of students. Younger students' voice resides at the lower levels of Mitra and Gross' (2009) student voice pyramid, while the older students are granted capacity building for leadership. Students at secondary school levels are usually given a voice through shared leadership. This not only increases their sense of belonging with the learning, but also prepares them for future citizenship.

While most of the literature indicated a positive correlation between student voice and student engagement, some also highlighted the problems with implementation. These studies noted that teachers often resist student voice, making it difficult for the educational model to change.

This, the literature suggests, happens especially when schools have performative pressures and teachers' abilities are judged against standard policies and practices. In such environments, teachers apprehend that allowing students too much voice would come in direct conflict with their performance as teachers. They feel threatened that their roles will be obscured and they will be judged as non-performing teachers. This insecurity prevents them from accepting the transformational model of education that propagates student engagement through student voice initiatives.

V. Conclusion

In light of the above literature review, it can be concluded that student voice integration in schools happens in many ways. Student voices can be encouraged in classrooms in terms of feedback on learning/teaching, it can also be encouraged in form of student collaborators/researchers who can do their own fact-finding in and around school to identify problems and solutions, and it can be even solicited as active and engaged leadership in all matters of the school. Sometimes student voice integration can particularly begin by including marginalised students into conversation. However, student voice integration is not without challenges. Resistance from teachers pose a huge impediment to successful student voice integration. Therefore, educational leaders must counsel and encourage their staff towards student voice inclusion and provide them a conducive school culture that facilitates multiple voices and believes in student-teacher partnerships. Once that is done, student dropout rates will automatically decline and student engagement will rise.

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