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“Amplifying Student Voice & Partnership” Conference from Three Perspectives: Student, Practitioner, and Academic

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Editor’s Note: The editor of IJSV, Dana Mitra, invited attendees at the Burlington conference to share their reflections the purpose and experience of the event. A student, a secondary school principal, and a university professor share their experiences of deepening their identities in the student voice community of scholarship and practice.

In July 2016, the International Seminar: Amplifying Student Voice & Partnership debuted in Burlington Vermont, hosted by Helen Beattie and Dana Mitra. The event was hosted by Up for Learning and University of Vermont Education Department, with some support from the Fred and Paul Bay Foundation, and the Donald J. Willower Center for the Study of Leadership and Ethics at Pennsylvania State University.

The mission was to create a global network of people and resources focused on fostering student voice research, policy, and practice. Participants from our first year

describe the seminar as "a new sense of community among people who share a similar commitment to student empowerment, voice and engagement in their world."

The conference was built out of five Student Voice Seminars held 2010-2025 in Cambridge, England. The meetings were established in honor of Dr. Jean Rudduck, a pioneer and ardent advocate for elevating the role of students in school redesign. Dr. Alison Cook Sather, internationally recognized as a researcher and leader in the field of amplifying youth voice, hosted these gatherings in partnership with Dr. Bethan Morgan. Each year approximately 70 youth voice researchers, practitioners, and student leaders from around the world have gathered to share their wisdom, passion, and diverse means to a common vision. A vital learning community evolved, sharing work through presentations, structured dialogue, small group work sessions, and informal networking.

We at the journal especially take time to reflect on this meeting, since this journal was founded based on the conversations that occurred at the succession of meetings. We built the journal out of a desire to structure the field of student voice—to create opportunities for ongoing dialogue and to share the latest scholarship in a format accessible to scholars, practitioners, and young people.

Keywords:

Student voice, collaboration, learning community, youth-adult partnership

“Amplifying Student Voice & Partnership” Conference from A Youth Perspective

Kaden Litzinger
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Delta Program

What Is Student Voice?

Student voice is the student's ability, and right, to freely express their opinions, beliefs, perspectives, and experiences without fear of judgment. It assists and guides students to take control of their learning experience, leading them on the path of passion for education, rather than an aversion to it. Contradictory to what many believe, there is no specified age when students should begin to voice their perspectives and/or advocate for themselves and their peers. Students of all ages, genders, races, and religions are freely encouraged to share their beliefs. Student voice is not solely directed toward students; adults play a large part in the matter of student voice. Adults must also help advocate for students' rights and abilities. If they are shut off from the experience, no progress will be made. It is a collaborative act, and it must be pursued. Student voice interest and advocacy can range from a 15-year-old adolescent student speaking in a classroom to a 70-year-old professor speaking at a conference.

Conference Overview

The “Amplifying Student Voice & Partnership” conference in Burlington, Vermont attracted a vast array of people from across the globe, representing a variety of ages, occupations, and cultures. The conference was opened with a blissful welcome given by Helen Beattie (UP for Learning), Alison Cook-Sather (Bryn Mawr College), and Dana

Mitra (Pennsylvania State University). They welcomed us to be there, as well as welcomed us to share our personal views on student advocacy in the nation.

This introduction was followed by a rigorous overview of the concept of the conference, dipping into our packed schedule, containing various speakers, activities, and presentations that were to happen throughout our time together. It also touched upon the diversity of participants this conference has attracted.

From my perspective, the primary objective of this conference was to bring together a handful of engaged practitioners, advocates, and professors from different backgrounds to show growing passion for the topic of student voice. As we were immersed in the pool of people with familiar understanding, we were able to see and comprehend other perspectives on the topic of student voice. This bringing together included how student voice directly relates to climate change to the connection between youth with learning disabilities to student voice advocacy. Not only were these experiences voiced through scattered conversations, but through various activities as well. These activities were geared toward different aspects of learning and student advocacy and voice.

Some of the first activities that took place were studying various speakers and their presentations. We were asked to reflect on the countless different aspects of each presentation. Sophie Worrall, a young, enthusiastic, and extremely bright first-year university student, presented on how Danish schools differ from their counterparts in the United States. She touched upon how students are able and ready to make a difference, and are encouraged to practice student voice, which is not the case in most school districts in the United States.

Throughout the conference, we participated in interactive exercises. The activities we were obligated to participate in at the conference were alternative and compelling rather than the boring normality we have come to expect in our classes in schools. “Chalk talk” is a silent exercise where large amounts of paper are scattered throughout the room with complex student voice advocacy questions placed on them. After briefly overviewing and pondering the questions, we were to converse unconventionally by scribing or even drawing our views on the question, engaging in an alternative form of a conversation with our peers. The activity in which we participated on the final day stood out to me the most. We gathered in a circle, and each spoke a word that we felt described our experience. Words such as “empowered, inspired, challenged” emerged.

What Do I Personally Take away from the Conference?

Not only do I take away an extensively greater knowledge of student voice, and the advocacy that accompanies it, but the understanding of student voice diversity across the globe. I leave with the familiarity of how to advocate for student voice in alternate forms, rather than purely speaking up. Over the time of the conference, I have formed relationships with various professors, advocates, and practitioners who have helped me to develop a greater understanding of the education system itself, and how it is slowly bettering to become pro-student voice.

How Can We Use Our Ample Knowledge to Objectify More Youths’ Interest in Student Voice?

Spread the word. Student voice is remarkably unrecognized, and from those who are familiar with the term, more than half are contradictory to it. Those who

acknowledge the definition and purpose of student voice should feel obligated to advocate on a substantial scale to inform those who are oblivious to the cause. As well as educating individuals on student voice, we need to convince them that student voice will not hurt, but rather improve, society and change its educational systems for the better.

We need to not only focus on educating higher education leaders, but the youth as well, as student voice is a two-way street on all levels. The youth need to be provided with opportunities to experience student voice and the vast amount of vocal freedom and independence it offers. We need to assist those adolescents who are struggling and less fortunate in classrooms, and educate them how to rise above their challenges. These minors need to be directed.

Student Voice Inspired

Amy Rex, Principal
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On an unusually sweltering July day, 80 or so spirited education researchers, policy experts, and practitioners from the United States and Canada, Europe, and Hong Kong gathered on the third floor of Waterman—one of the University of Vermont's oldest and least updated buildings. It was the 2016 International Amplifying Student Voice conference, and despite the air, which was dense and lacks any type of flow, the energy generated from the sharing of a diverse array of knowledge, experiences, and aspirations was electric.

I was honored to be in attendance and extremely proud to have with me two teachers and three high school students. Collectively, we were the champions and agitators of student voice and youth and adult partnerships. The Harwood students, once again, affirmed that student voice is an essential component in the design and implementation of a system of student-centered learning—sometimes referred to as *personalized learning*. Students possess all the elements necessary for education transformation: passion, experiential knowledge, optimism, and a personal and collective investment in the present and future. Their presence was a bold reminder of my own commitment and responsibility to this work.

After three days, we parted with a litany of ideas. Some were pie in the sky—a learning opportunity in Denmark, a national campaign for student voice legislation, or a statewide student coalition. And others were more pragmatic—an understanding of student voice shared by the Harwood faculty and students, or strategies that promote student voice in the classroom. The latter was an area of interest for our attending students. It was clear that they came to equate equity of voice to increased student engagement in the learning process. Although Harwood had made great gains in creating of system of student-centered learning, in the eyes of these students, few teachers had made changes to include student voice as a viable classroom practice. This would become our focus for the year ahead. Dream big, begin small; have impact.

In late August, the time arrived to transition from the relaxed pace of long, summer days to the clamor of the school year. The two teachers who attended the conference and I met with the three students early one morning. We read a variety of resources on student voice that were shared at the conference, and as the youth wiped

the summer sleep from their eyes, the messages that inspired them just a month ago jolted them to life; an understanding of how student voice can be used in the classroom as a means for motivation and engagement is clearly a priority. We unanimously decided to use an excerpt from “Motivation, Engagement and Student Voice,” a Jobs for the Future project written by Eric Toshalis and Michael J. Nakkula, to conduct a text protocol with the Harwood Union faculty using the “4 As.”

An overarching theme for our school district is equity—that is, to create a school community that embraces the belief that all learners can grow academically, socially, and emotionally in student-centered classrooms where they are valued, respected, supported, and appropriately challenged. Pre-service was to begin in just a few short days. This year, it would kick off with a keynote speaker, Matt Kolan, who would address the entire faculty and staff on the topic, “Education Inspired by the Wisdom of Nature: Principles and Practices for Equity and Well Being.” This would be followed by facilitated breakout groups centered on two objectives: first, to recognize classroom and system practices already in place that promote equity, and second, to raise awareness about our barriers and blind spots.

As we contemplated the connection between equity and student voice, we wondered if the participants of the upcoming pre-service would identify educators’ disparate thinking about student voice in the classroom as a viable strategy to promote equity as a blind spot. Seemingly our selected text, which focused on the rationale for student-centered classrooms, would be a perfect follow-up. We were truly inspired. Then reality revisited us.

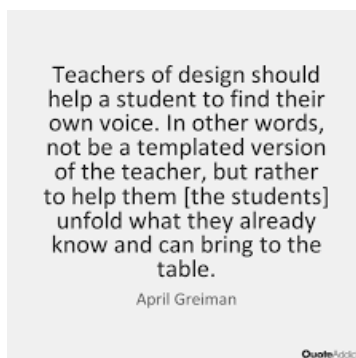


Figure 1. April Greiman quote (Heller, 2015).

Although the text protocol would provide the faculty with an opportunity to develop a shared understanding of student voice, it would do little to ensure “amplification.” There was a lull as we silently imagined how to best bring forth the notion of student voice in the classroom in ways that would produce authentic results. We agreed that the activity must encourage and challenge, but not chagrin or threaten. We wanted teachers to rethink their practice and stretch beyond their comfort zone, not put up the defense wall. After another hour of brainstorming, we decided on two follow-up activities: a chalk talk and exit card snowball. Figure 2 illustrates our agenda.

2016-17 Learning Community Goal:

We will collaboratively examine teacher practice and student performance to develop and implement more effective instructional practices in order to improve student engagement and achievement.

Today's Outcomes:

1. To deepen our understanding of student voice and the various levels of implementation.
2. Explore current levels of student voice and opportunities for expanding it.

Agenda

Introduction	3:00 - 3:05
Four A's protocol	3:05 - 3:30
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Break into groups of 4 	
Chalk Talk:	3:30 - 3:50
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are you currently doing in your practice to amplify student voice? ● Silent posting and viewing 	
Snowball Activity / Exit Card	3:50 - 4:00
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is one strategy you plan to use within the next month to increase student voice in your classroom/practice? ● Write on paper provided and pass in 	

Figure 2. Conference agenda.

Theory into Action

Harwood Union has a strong culture of youth and adult partnership, and our experience has shown us that “prior planning prevents poor performance” (the five Ps). To that end, if we want students to effectively lead, then we must give them the opportunity to acquire the proper knowledge and skills to do so.

It was trending toward the noon hour. As we concluded our meeting, we divvied the tasks—preparing the agenda; reformatting the protocol; crafting a faculty memo; gathering materials; and most importantly, identifying students and setting aside time to provide them with a “one shot” facilitation training.

Typically this latter endeavor would include a school wide shout out—an open invitation and at least a day-long training. Like many schools, there are always the usual suspects who are not only willing to step up and engage in this type of work, but also have a natural affinity toward it; however, at Harwood we make a strong effort to engage those who, for a variety of reasons, tend to quietly, or not, hover on the outer perimeter of school, and then provide them the support to be successful if they choose to take the risk.

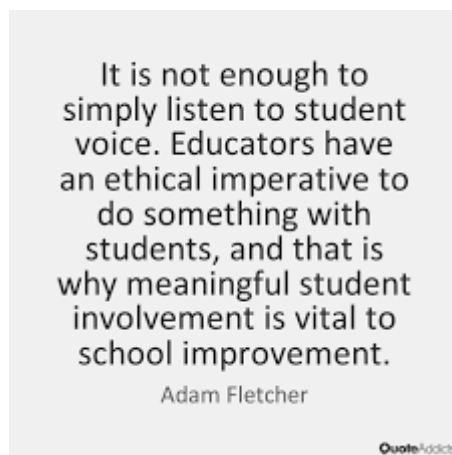


Figure 3. Adam Fletcher quote (Fletcher, 2005).

Although time was short, in addition to the three students who attended the International Amplifying Student Voice conference, seven other students committed and attended a brief training that included reading the article in advance and then walking through the protocols with an emphasis on facilitation strategies. Some, perhaps, were a little skeptical by our overwhelming enthusiasm, so we comforted them by the fact that we would pair two students with one adult. Over time, we had recognized the power of the youth and adult partnership in producing more successful outcomes. The students will serve as the lead facilitators and the adult as the one who will keep time, and manage the materials.

The Learning Community

The Harwood faculty is divided into five “Learning Communities” or interdisciplinary groups that meet twice monthly. There is an overarching school-wide goal, with each Learning Community then selecting a personalized focus within the framework of that goal. Our overarching goal is to collaboratively examine teacher practice and student performance to develop and implement more effective instructional practices in order to improve student engagement and achievement.

At a first glance, having students facilitate a Learning Community meeting that calls upon teachers to publicly examine their practice seems absurd—why would you expose teachers in front of students in such a way? Simply, if the learning organization is truly committed to improving instruction and student achievement and understands—believes—that this cannot happen in isolation, and has been intentional in creating a culture of care and trust, then the concept of youth and adults as partners in improving learning for students and teachers, and partners in improving the organization for all, is sensible and worthwhile.

The Meeting

The Learning Communities were subdivided. Nervously, our student facilitators led their faculty group of 10-12 through the text protocol. Teachers volunteered their agreements, arguments, assumptions and aspirations. Once ample time was given to activate their beliefs, ideas, and/or experiences about the relationship between student voice, engagement and motivation, they were invited to participate in the chalk talk (Figure 4). This activity models a powerful classroom strategy for amplifying student voice equitably. It provides all learners an opportunity to make their thinking visible without judgment. It allows time and space for contemplation, “hearing” the thoughts of others, and building on each other’s ideas. Essentially, it is a silent dialog.

To close the session, the student facilitators asked teachers to complete an exit question. They emphasized it was anonymous, and explained that the responses would be crumpled into “snowballs” and thrown into the center of the faculty at their next meeting (Figure 5). Faculty members would take turns, grab a “snowball,” and read the

statement. Again, the activity modeled an equitable, safe, and effective classroom strategy that affirms and strengthens the learning of all members.

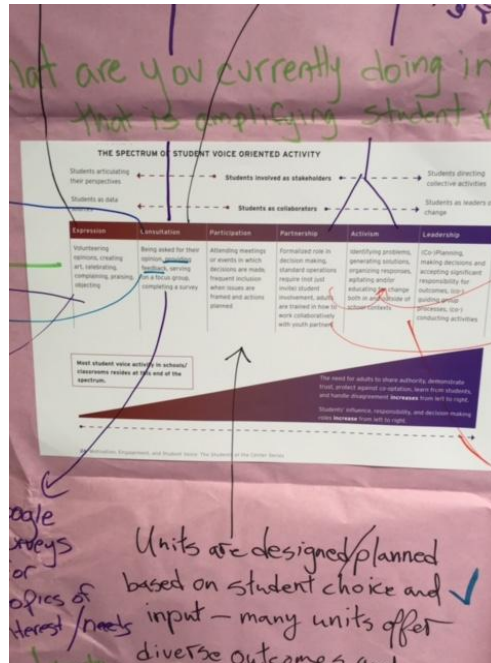


Figure 4. Chalk talk activity.



Figure 5. Snowball activity.

The Results

In early December, I reflected on the results. Visually the outcomes of the meeting were promising. As teachers discussed the text and unpacked the “spectrum of student voice” and identified shared practices currently ~~be~~ implemented in the classroom, they recognized that across the school existed exceptional creativity, shared practices, pockets of true innovation, and room to grow—and perhaps, most importantly, that the shift toward a system of personalized learning that includes student voice was taking shape without a collapse in rigor or results.

The historical concept of the teacher as the keeper of knowledge, and the student as a participant to be seen and not heard, is finally dissipating. Furthermore, at Harwood the youth and adult partnership in learning is also contributing to classroom and school environs that are more equitable. As the second half of the school year unfolds, collectively students and teachers will continue to carry the work forward. This includes students completing the “Harwood Teacher Feedback and Reflection form”—a process that provides students an opportunity to reflect on themselves as learners while giving teachers feedback about the course, pedagogy, and the climate in the classroom. At the same time, teachers can reflect on these results while also examining, in their Learning Communities, strategies toward student-centered classrooms.

Dream big, begin small; have impact.

The Role of Student Voice in Increasing the Quality of Professional Learning

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In this issue of *International Journal of Student Voice*, two authors reflected on their engagement with student voice. Kaden Litzinger, high school freshman at the Delta Program who has led student voice initiatives, discussed the imperative for student voice in schools in “Amplifying Student Voice & Partnership Conference from a Youth Perspective.” Amy Rex, principal of Harwood Middle and High School, discussed in “Student Voice Inspired” her beliefs of and efforts to include students in her school’s shift from teacher- to student-centered pedagogical practice. Their experiences and reflections engaging in school change processes reflect a wider hope for student voice researchers and practitioners—young people’s involvement in professional learning experiences is a necessary component for school improvement. Litzinger made the call for the necessity of student voice, whereas Rex illustrated Harwood’s efforts to build youth-adult professional learning communities. Both understood that such collaborations are essential to improving the quality of professional learning.

Developing Professional Learning

Professional learning is the experiences and outcomes that help participants obtain “the knowledge and skills necessary to enable students to succeed in a well-rounded education.” (Hirsch, 2015) Such experiences should be “sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused” (Hirsch, 2015). Yet most educators will speak of professional learning as designed without their input; disempowering; omitting crucial information needed for designing nuanced interventions; and ultimately, ineffective at shifting practices. Take, for example, in-services, the typical approach to facilitating professional learning. During in-services it is commonplace for administrators or content

experts to present research and facilitate discussions about the causes and consequences of problematic school policies and educator practices. Leaders will then advance certain evidence-based practices in efforts to solve the problem, only to be met with mixed responses—disbelief, anger, or acquiescence, to name a few.

Administrators might use empirical research to help produce and validate generalizations about an organizational problem, which then provides the necessary argument for a particular intervention, but such approaches can omit important site-specific experiences or tackle wrong variables, meaning critiques emerging from unconvinced participants might not be inaccurate. Whereas participants might not be wrong, Argyris (1991) argues such responses can be defensive, resulting in professionals focusing narrowly on “identifying and correcting errors in the external environment” (blaming others) rather than also looking “inward.” (pp. 99-100) Such lack of inquiry and self-reflection make it difficult to cultivate a sense of community ready to tackle difficult school struggles. To avoid such pitfalls, Hirsch’s (2015) definition of professional learning requires more thoughtful dialogue about problems in order to develop a shared understanding of the causes and consequences of problems and collective ownership over the development and implementation of site-specific interventions.

Holding thoughtful dialogue before crafting and implementing new strategies is necessary for effective professional learning because each school has its own unique history, culture, practices, and personalities, which can create school-specific sociocultural conditions (values, beliefs, groupings) and structural arrangements (roles, processes). These features of organizational life can create problems or make solving

them very difficult (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). Thus, addressing persistent problems might require more than a slight adjustment to policy or practice; the assumptions professionals have of a problem's causes and effects, and the structures and processes built from these assumptions to address them, might actually be a major part of the problem. When these features of the problem remain hidden from discourse, newly developed change strategies can either exacerbate problems or focus too narrowly on a problem's symptoms rather than diving more deeply into its causes (Brasof, 2015; Mitchell & Sackney, 2011).

If inhibiting sociocultural conditions and structural arrangements are in place, professional learning will require individuals and groups surfacing vital information and challenging individual and collective norms and assumptions that drive these conditions and arrangements (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Whereas this might seem obvious, most times professionals have incomplete or inaccurate information about organizational life (Simon, 1991), creating workplace blind spots that are difficult to address, especially when professionals are not well practiced in reflective dialogue. However, once such vital information is acquired and open and honest dialogue about (re)develop structures and processes. In this view, professional learning is just as much about the self as others and organizational structures and processes. Students can be essential partners in such an endeavor because they often have insights that educators need for a more complete picture of school life (Cook-Sather, 2009) and are quite capable of engaging in dialogue that challenges adult assumptions about the causes and consequences problems (Brasof, 2015; Zeldin, 2004).

Purposes of Student Voice

Unfortunately, professional learning experiences usually exclude students. Both authors believe this is a mistake; their definitions of the purpose of and experience with student voice illustrate the necessity of their inclusion in professional learning. According to Litzinger, when school is working well, students and educators “assist those adolescents that are struggling and less fortunate.” Absence of such progress, Litzinger believes students have a “right to freely express their opinions, beliefs, perspectives, and experiences without fear of judgment [to educators].” Litzinger’s definition conjures images of citizenship and social justice, yet she sees professional learning as an open dialogue between youth and adults. In this way, student voice becomes a means to “freely express ... without fear of judgment” problems undermining teaching and learning. Thus, Litzinger suggests that students’ critiques of their schooling experience is not only a fundamental right that promotes justice-oriented citizens, but a necessary strategy for uncovering problems with a school’s most vulnerable populations. Still, Litzinger’s tone is one of both admiration and urgency—she sees the potential of student voice for improving educator practices, but continues to find such possibilities “remarkably unrecognized.”

Principal Rex also believes in the ability of students to increase the quality of professional learning:

Students possess all the elements necessary for education transformation: passion, experiential knowledge, optimism, and a personal and collective investment in the present and future. Their presence is a bold reminder of my own commitment and responsibility to this work.

To Principal Rex, student voice is a potential source of individual and organizational renewal and growth—students’ unique positionalities in schools fosters important insights about the learning environment and are quite eager to share these insights as

well as participate in school improvement activity. Yet her year-long youth-adult professional learning effort is a reminder that educators can be resistant to such collegiality.

Some, perhaps are a little skeptical.... Over time, we have also recognized the power of the youth and adult partnership in producing more successful outcomes ... if the learning organization is truly committed to improving instruction and student achievement, and understands—believes that this cannot happen in isolation, and has been intentional in creating a culture of care and trust, then the concept of youth and adults as partners in improving learning for students and teachers, and partners in improving the organization for all, is sensible and worthwhile.

Because of educator skepticism, Rex's reminds educators of the intimate connection between youth-adult partnership and the aims of a learning organization. Recognizing such sociocultural challenges in her own school, Rex repositioned students to be more than just perspective sharers—the typical approach for incorporating students into school improvement efforts. She assigned two students to every educator and had them lead conversations about classroom learning. It was her hopes that such a shift would engender trust and respect, to challenge “the concept of the teacher as the keeper of knowledge, and the student as a participant to be seen and not heard.” Rex and Litizinger believe in the role of student voice in increasing the quality of professional learning, but neither is deluded. Serious hurdles exist in their spaces—shifting from teacher- to student-centered pedagogy requires responsive and flexible educators, and looking deeply at one's practices that might be contributing to student failure can be complex and painful.

Spread the Word

Designing inclusive spaces and experiences for youth to participate in professional learning is atypical, and therefore can be challenging. Yet no other member

of a school has more at stake in the outcomes of professional learning than students. Hirsch's (2015) definition is important, but does not explicitly include young people as sources of data, and ultimately, as collaborators. Neither does the widely lauded "professional learning community" model. Educational leaders like Rex and Litzinger are interested in building educators' capacities to challenge individual and organizational inhibitors to professional growth and firmly believe that student leadership is essential to those processes.

As a field, academics will continue to theorize the reasons and ways students can foster more productive professional learning. Models of student voice that come from schools like Rex's and Litzinger's help to concretize and refine ideas. The *International Journal of Student Voice* can be a space to encourage investigations and share stories among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers about the principles, processes, and outcomes of student voice—for the field needs to continue expanding so youth-adult collaborations become the norm in professional learning. This issue advances some of those aims. As Litzinger aptly put it, advocates need to continue to, "spread the word.... Those who acknowledge the definition and purpose of student voice should feel obligated to advocate on a substantial scale to inform those who are oblivious.... We need to convince them that student voice will not hurt society but improve and change it for the better."

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Discussion Questions:

What should the purpose of student voice conferences be?

What are useful ways for young people teachers, principals, researchers, and policy makers to talk to one another about student voice?