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7 Ways the Most Effective Teachers Strengthen Student Voice

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Overview

The job of an educator is to prepare students for their career in the academic realm and in the workplace. With both career and classroom, knowing that you have a voice is pivotal. To ensure all students will be successful moving forward on their learning journey, educators must develop a student's sense of self through the cultivation of their voice, as it plays a critical role in the development of leadership in the classroom and beyond. By designing learning with student voice in mind, educators can nurture students' unique talents and enhance their intellectual capacity. Student voice, in this sense, refers to the opportunity available to students to provide input on instruction by sharing their ideas and opinions in a way that makes them feel heard and valued. The key, however, is for educators to seamlessly build student voice into the way instruction is designed and delivered so that it becomes a consistent thread in the classroom culture. In the end, students who have a voice can be more successful in school, and more.

Teachers in all varieties of classrooms have found success in incorporating and strengthening student voice by following these seven easy-to-implement tips:

1. **Focus on your Environment:** Often teachers do an extraordinary job at making their classroom look physically inclusive and inviting. Aside from the meaningful things that educators can do with their physical classroom environment, it is also vitally important to focus on purposeful words and actions within the classroom environment. More specifically, teachers can reflect on how their words and actions can intentionally or unintentionally have an impact on our teaching and learning. As educators look to merge student voice and environment, create an environment that is truly risk-free by engaging students in dialogue, answer questions, and provide feedback. It is important to let students know, with voice and praise, that all contributions are sincerely valued, and all student input will be used to positively impact teaching, learning, and the daily quality of education.
2. **Employ A Genuine Connection:** Students can tell when their teacher is doing something they "have" to do rather than what they "want" to do. So it is important that educators take an honest approach to building relationships with students by eliciting small talk throughout the school day to build rapport and respect. Over time, those chats will turn into lengthy stories and maybe even in-depth discussion. The more students feel connected to their teacher, the more they are willing to engage their voice in the classroom.
3. **Create and Offer Clear Forms of Communication:** To increase and strengthen student voice in the classroom, educators must take time to communicate with students in various, creative ways. Also make sure that students are offered the same opportunity, to submit work and showcase their talents and thoughts, communicated in a multitude of ways. To offer a student an assignment with only one option for them to communicate what they learned, limits their creativity and their voice. As the teacher, plan and reflect, ensuring that you are creating and utilizing various forms of clear communication with your team of students. In turn, make sure that students are encouraged to use their own voice, as they review assignments and then communicate questions or mastery, in a written, oral, artistic, or digital manner. Student choice and voice go hand-in-hand.
4. **Survey, Survey, Survey:** Surveying our students on a regular basis is a quick and easy way to increase student's voice. Failing to ask students about their honest thoughts, with many different topics, is a missed opportunity on numerous levels. Orally, written down, or with a surveying instrument, ask students about the instructional strategies they enjoy best, the activities they do not enjoy, what topics interest them the most when reading, and what topics they would enjoy writing about. Then, use the information in a formative manner to guide your instruction and classroom discussions. Students will notice that you incorporated their voice and their ideas if you do it often enough and in a purposeful manner.

5. **Personalize Lesson Plans:** Learning is a unique journey for each child. Educators need to design lesson plans with content points in mind first and then personalize these plans based on student interests, learning styles and/or needs as well as their feedback. By asking students what they need or want in an educational experience, teachers can increase student investment through engagement and accountability. It's a win-win solution!
6. **Make Students Decision Makers:** Student's voice is more than just incorporating discussion into a lesson; it's allowing students to have decision making power as well. It is no longer enough just to ask students what they think. Educators have to go a step further and utilize the information gathered from student's voice and act upon it. When allowing classroom outcomes to be the result of student ideas and opinion, rapport is built with students instantly. Just like schools have elections for student council positions or tryouts for the school news anchors for morning announcements, procedures should be put in place in all classrooms to prioritize student's voice, make it accessible to all students and make decisions that are directly a result of these efforts. Students will see the impact their opinion and ideas have on their learning experiences.
7. **Make Multiculturalism More than a Catch-Phrase:** All effective educators find value in embracing multiculturalism. At times, even with the best efforts, as teachers take on more and more to serve students, efforts at showcasing multiculturalism can dwindle. However, with the right approach, not only can multiculturalism be far more than a catch-phrase, but it can also be utilized to strengthen classroom instruction and student voice at the same time. Make an intentional and ongoing effort to design lessons that explore, examine, and appreciate different cultures and different perspectives. Work with a partner or team to ensure accountability. In addition, with books, history, authors, mathematicians, and much more, ensure that all students are granted the opportunity to look through what has been educationally termed as, "windows and mirrors." A window offers students the chance to metaphorically look through a "window" and see others who may have a different skin color, personality, religious view, belief, or academic ability. A mirror gives students the chance to look at lessons with a "mirror" perspective, knowing that throughout the instructional day and within all content areas, students can see others who are like them, or "mirror" them in many ways. Increasing student voice through a multicultural lens builds respect, camaraderie and community in the classroom.

If educators want to have a lasting impact on their students, they must empower them to take charge of their learning through the cultivation of their own voice. By creating a safe place for students to learn and communicate, teachers set the stage for relationships to be built with their students. Taking time to talk with students personally, or receive feedback through a survey, allows teachers the opportunity to learn more about student learning preferences and styles. This knowledge empowers the educator to personalize lesson plans immediately, which instantly enhances instruction and engagement in the classroom. Educators can boost student voice by sharing decision making power so that their opinion is not just heard but incorporated into the running of the classroom. Lastly, by embracing and celebrating the variety of students in the classroom and school building, educators teach students to acknowledge unique attributes in others, gain new insight on a multitude of cultures and traditions, and build special connections with their peers due to shared learning experiences in an inclusive environment.

These seven tips are classroom tested and approved, but more importantly, they have transformed classrooms across the nation because students are valued, encouraged, and empowered to use their voice constructively.