

# **The power of student voice**

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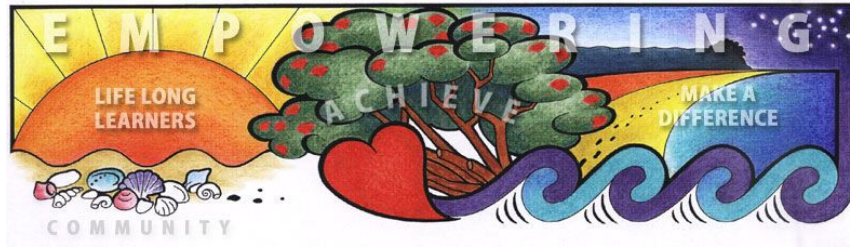
Over the past couple of years, Red Beach Primary School has made extensive use of the power of student voice to record our own development and to guide our decision making. We now regularly interview our students, capturing their thoughts about their learning, their thinking, their learning environments, and the teaching that supports this learning on paper and video. Over and over again, we have been literally astounded as to what messages the children are giving and how powerful it is, to truly listen to what they say. It would sound professionally impressive to report that this strategy was all part of a grand plan, but interestingly, this is far from the truth. We have become aware that there has been a trend in recent times to use student voice data in school improvement and effectiveness research. The research of Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace (1996) tells us that, “what pupils say about teaching, learning, and schooling is not only worth listening to but provides an important—perhaps the most important—foundation for thinking about ways of improving schools” (p. 1). Looking back, however, we certainly were not aware of its power until we tried it out for ourselves during the 2005–2006 school years. The following is an account of our experience in using student voice as a key piece of evidence to drive forward the changes we were aiming for.

## **Creating and fostering a vision**

Our school is situated in Red Beach, a seaside suburb on the Whangaparaoa Peninsula just north of Auckland City. The roll usually settles around 600 students from Years 0–6, and is a decile 8 school. In 2005, the teaching staff, board of trustees, and parent representatives worked together to create our own “vision”: our collective take on the purpose of our school—a visionary statement that would summarise the key concepts that we wanted our school to stand for. After much discussion and dialogue, we became convinced that in order for this vision to become truly meaningful to everyone, especially the students, a visual metaphor would be important (see Figure 1). The result is a pictorial representation of the statement: “Red Beach School is a community empowering lifelong learners to achieve and make a difference”. In September 2005, the whole school, including many parents, spent the day at our nearby beach celebrating the launch of this vision. The school was buzzing with

excitement at what we had created together, and we were keen to move forward to bring this vision to life. We were on our way to becoming the learning community that many of us envisaged. Employing this momentum was vital in continuing our journey, and so we were keen to move forward to the next stage of development.

Figure 1 Red Beach School's vision



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The shells represent individual lifelong learners. Together, they operate as a *community* of learners.

The heart represents Red Beach School's shared values.

The beach and the pohutukawa tree symbolise the local environment of Red Beach, representing every individual's desire to achieve.

These are the "four waves" of the Red Beach School's curriculum:

- 1st wave: Foundation learning—literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy.
- 2nd wave: Learning for wellbeing—physical, mental, emotional, relating to others.
- 3rd wave: Thinking to learn. Enquiry learning, using a "powerful learning" model.
- 4th wave: Learning to make a difference: the "so what" and what next" questions.

## Successful learners

The next stage was to start the process of bringing everyone's vision to life, and the senior-leadership team decided to focus first on unpacking our concept of lifelong learning, one of the central concepts of our new school vision. This is where we hit upon the idea of approaching the students to investigate their ideas. Sarah Martin, the deputy principal, interviewed a random sample of 80 students, capturing their responses on video, asking them primarily what they thought successful learners did. We saw this very much as a collection of evidence as to what the students perceived learning to be all about. After many days of data gathering and video editing, Sarah had collected about an hour of footage that demonstrated quite clearly what students

at Red Beach School thought about successful learners. What a huge shock it was when this was presented to the teaching staff, as the evidence all pointed in the same direction, and that direction was nothing like what we would have wanted to hear. Students in our school had no idea what learning was, let alone what you had to do to be successful at it:

Successful learners sit up straight. (Year 2 student)

Successful learners do as the teacher tells them. (Year 5 student)

Successful learners pick up the rubbish. (Year 1 student)

The only glimmer of a better understanding of learning came from some statements such as:

Successful learners teach people sometimes. (Year 1 student)

They usually focus lots, they are well behaved and they are good at all subjects. (Year 5 student)

The message was very clear to all of us; if we were going to develop in the students of Red Beach School the power to become lifelong learners, they needed to know and understand what learning actually is and what people who are good at it do, say, and intuitively think about. We needed to make transparent to our students what successful people in life habituate.

## **Language of learning**

This was the beginning of our journey into working intentionally to ensure that our students gained first a language and second an understanding of what it is to be a lifelong learner. Our teachers set about using the language of learning in our classrooms, such as: “I can see that you are taking a risk today in writing words you don’t know how to spell, did you know that good learners take risks?”, and discussion sessions around: “What do you think good learners actually do inside their heads? Did you know that when you make a mistake, it is a learning opportunity, how will we learn if we never make a mistake?”

Very quickly, the language of our classrooms changed from the language of behaving to the language of learning:

I am a learner, I keep trying and trying and trying. Good learners persevere.  
(Year 1 student)

I now make connections, like when I am reading I use hard words, then when I am writing I know what to write, that's how my brain is working. (Year 6 student)

The children now have a new language which is really helping them explain what is happening to them in the learning process. (Teacher)

Teachers were encouraged to spend quality time talking about learning, unpacking each of the qualities, connecting them to the students' everyday lives. Suddenly, it was okay to spend time discussing learning, sometimes as part of a curriculum session, for example: "How will we take risks in our learning in reading today?", or, at others stages of the day, as part of open class discussions about the qualities, for example: "So what is this reflecting business, who can tell us an example of a time when reflecting helped them learn?" The qualities of lifelong learning permeated through all areas of the curriculum. Certificates at assemblies changed from "Great work" to such comments as "Perseveres as a lifelong learner in reading".

### **Talking about the qualities of a lifelong learner**

Our understanding of becoming a lifelong learner fits very much into the draft curriculum's key competency of "managing self" (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 11). A lifelong learner is someone who:

1. asks questions
2. takes risks
3. sets goals/plans
4. makes connections
5. self-motivates
6. preservers
7. reflects.

Providing a visual representation of the school vision reaped big rewards for us, so we returned to this visual and used the metaphor of the seashell (see Figure 2) with its various sections to symbolise a "learner" with seven different qualities.

Figure 2 Red Beach School's model of a lifelong learner



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It seemed to make sense to us that the metaphor of the shell on the beach depicted in the visual of our school vision would make an excellent metaphor for the concept of a lifelong learner, and the seven qualities were the result of the teaching staff's efforts to describe this competency.

By May 2006, we were ready to collect further evidence to see what difference this focus was making. Once again, a randomly generated sample of 80 students, including some of the same children who had been interviewed previously, was videotaped responding to questions such as, "What do successful learners do?" The results were highly exciting—60 percent of the sample could easily discuss successful learning in terms of the qualities of lifelong learning. This time, responses included:

Well, learners are people who set goals, who make connections and who question themselves and others. (Year 2 student)

Successful learners carry out all of the qualities of lifelong learners. They persevere, set goals, self-motivate, reflect, question, and make connections. (Year 5 student)

When we probed a little more we even got examples of how the students were using this in their everyday lives:

I set goals all the time at home, such as doing up my shoe laces; I am persevering with it all the time. (Year 2 student)

It was time to celebrate! We had a great staff meeting, watched the video evidence, and shared some bubbles! It was an excellent morale booster. Now we were at 60 percent, which of course meant there was still a way to go, especially as this had only been 60 percent of the sample. Individualised coaching sessions were then set up for

teachers, examining the specific pedagogical practices that appeared to be making the difference, so that those with previous experience could share this with each other.

### **Continuum of development**

However, more insight into students' understanding of successful learning came from this evidence of student voice than was initially expected. By carefully analysing what the students actually said, we realised that there is a continuum of development that the students move through in their use of this learning language. This continuum moves along from an initial stage of "parroting back the language the teacher has given them" to a final stage where the students' language demonstrates a true sense of internalisation, that is, they speak about themselves as learners, relating examples in their everyday lives. As one student, who we would now classify to be towards the "profound" end of this continuum, told us:

It's just in my heart and in my head, its part of me. (Year 6 student)

What we discovered is that there are stages in between these two ends of the continuum, and they are developmental, not age specific. We heard 6 year olds articulate a depth of understanding that is quite amazing, and we also listened to 10 year olds who could only simply recall one lifelong-learning quality. Very quickly, we realised that this continuum has connections to John West-Burnham's concepts of shallow to deep to profound learning (see Table 1). To truly learn something, you need to internalise that new knowledge or idea, to own it, to make it part of you. As West-Burnham states: "Profound learning ... results in the creation of personal meaning—integrating principle, values and practice so that behaviour is intuitive and the response to change is creative, challenging, ethically driven and integrative" (n.d., p. 4). We want our students to have a profound understanding of what it is to be a lifelong learner, to live and breath these qualities as a means of personal self-management, and it was most apparent that by truly listening to their voices, we could tell where they were on this continuum, and more importantly how to support them to move forward.

**Table 1 Concepts of shallow to deep to profound learning**

	<b>Emergent</b>	<b>Shallow</b>	<b>Deep</b>	<b>Profound</b>
Means	Shallow, Deep, Profound	Memorisation	Reflection	Intuition
Outcomes		Information	Knowledge	Wisdom
Evidence		Replication	Understanding	Meaning

(John West-Burnham)

### **Student voice as feedback**

Although we initially only stumbled upon this practice of listening to the student voice, by the time we got to mid-2006 we were sold upon its power and its relevance to developing many facets of our school. We randomly consulted the students on all manner of school decisions from what equipment to purchase next to how to solve problems in the playground. By the end of 2006, the senior-leadership team were using the students’ voices as part of our feedback to staff in the performance-management cycle. It was actually a delight to provide feedback to our individual teachers how their students saw them as learners as well as teachers. A great example of this was:

My teacher is a really good learner, she tells us about what she is learning about her teaching and how she sometimes finds it hard, just like we do. We give her feedback by telling her she is doing great. (Year 3 student)

Since then, the power of the student voice has become an extremely important means of gathering evidence so that we can review how the development of our school vision is actually proceeding. It is indeed the major change agent in our school. At present, we are reworking our pedagogical approach to ensure that our students can solve problems and investigate ideas independently; so it is them we approach as a means of finding out what they could do and what they thought. In our quest to truly personalise learning for each and every one of our students, we continue to listen in depth to what they are saying. We do realise we have much to learn from these wonderful children and will keep working to ensure that they can be heard.

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