

COMMENTARY

Youth voice and the Llano Grande Center

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The Llano Grande Center for Research and Development (LGC) was initially invited to respond to the articles in this volume because there were no ‘youth voices’ in this special edition, one ostensibly about ‘youth voices’. The Llano Grande Center is a non-profit education and community development organization founded in the mid-1990s by youth and teachers out of a public high school classroom in a rural South Texas (USA) community. The Center was created, in large part, to cultivate youth voices as important elements of curriculum development and teacher training at the local public high school. As youth became active participants in the curriculum building process, they also became researchers in a series of action research initiatives sponsored by the Llano Grande Center, out of the local schools. The youth who lent their energy to the formative stages of the Center are now teachers and cultural workers in the same rural schools and community. These young teachers now cultivate this process of building the new youth voices—a process that also informs the pedagogical programming practices of the Center. One of the significant lessons learned by the Center is that higher education and learning are not linear processes. We have also learned that the insight and fresh ideas youth bring to the work of education are not enough in and of themselves; they also need agency and power. This understanding informs the work of the Center, which is grounded in strong teaching, learning, and leadership development defined by authentic youth and adult partnerships.

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The staff of the Center convened several dialogical sessions to reflect upon the articles submitted to this special edition of the *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. The staff includes two high school students, three young educators and two college professors. Through a collaborative process, the participants read the articles critically and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of each piece. This reflection, then, serves as an example of how youth voice can impact school reform and community change.

Some articles focused on literature reviews, others presented compelling organizational frameworks, while others showcased interesting work where youth participate in helping pre-service teachers understand better the craft of teaching. All the articles responded to the issue of youth voice, though some more directly than others. All told, the most important point that emerged is that youth do not have any significant voice in advancing school reform initiatives anywhere in Australia, the UK, or in the USA. Having done our work in Texas public schools for the past 15 years, we know this to be true in the USA, though we also have reason to be hopeful, because we see through these articles, as well as through the work of the Llano Grande Center, that there does exist groundbreaking work in some schools where young people do manifest a critical voice in the context of school reform and community change.

Values that inform our work include open dialogue and storytelling, and after our conversations specific to these articles, we want to expand the discourse by telling a couple of stories about some of our work where youth have been active participants in shaping policy and impacting their community. In addition, we feel the best theories are theories in use, and in this case the theory is embedded within the practice.

A recent example of how our philosophy of youth voice, storytelling and open dialogue came into practice revolves around a \$21.2 million school construction bond, where students became the lead voice in a campaign that informed local residents on the implications of this bond.

Story one

This past year Edcouch-Elsa (Texas, USA) school district officials, faced with a low-income tax-base, an exploding student population, and deteriorating campuses, wanted to take advantage of a time-limited state programme that would pay 90% on a school construction bond. Needing voter approval to apply for the bond, district officials became concerned of a growing distrust of school leaders in the community, a distrust that was prompted by stalled construction on a fine arts centre, and the arrest of two school board trustees—one of whom is implicated in bribery related to construction contracts.

The school superintendent, who works closely with the youth of the Llano Grande Center, approached staff members of the Center to begin a conversation about ways the youth could participate in promoting the different implications of the bond process. Knowing our students' history in working with local officials, and realizing the students' ability to host and engage

community members in honest, sincere, and meaningful dialogue, youth ranging in age from 14–18 were asked to participate in and lead a committee of community members overseeing the upcoming bond election.

Over a six-week period, youth facilitated weekly meetings of school district officials, teachers, parents, and community members to discuss ways of informing the community of the benefits and consequences of approving the construction bond. Informational fliers, church announcements, and town hall meetings came out of these meetings, and students led many of the initiatives in the community to disseminate this information.

During this time, students also worked with the Llano Grande Center to develop a seven-minute video on the bond as part of the strategy for informing the public. Using in their video the stories from principals dealing with old facilities and students dealing with cramped classrooms, the Llano Grande students were invited to air their video on public access television.

On 13 May, voters approved the district's application for the bond, a decision many have attributed to the work and voice the students lent to informing the public. This process displayed learning on several levels for various groups. For the students, this exercise not only allowed them to display their talents and learn leadership skills, but also led to a sense of ownership in the development of their own school district. For teachers, this process led to a deeper understanding of allowing youth voice to be a major contributor—if not the major contributor—to their learning. And for community members, this youth-led campaign positively challenged the traditional notion of leadership, opening some eyes to the possibility of including student voice on a more profound level.

Story two

Youth have been instrumental in our work with local school districts that are looking to Llano Grande for assistance in infusing socio-cultural understanding and development in their approach to education.

As important members of the community, students are vital in helping expand the Llano Grande philosophy of community as a classroom. Students are not only learners receiving education, but equal participants and co-creators of their learning experiences, who engage in their community.

When we began working this year with two different public school districts on ways to transform the learning process in their schools, we were very deliberate about having students involved in the discussions. Many of these youth—already acclimated and well versed in ideas of engagement and comfortable in leadership roles through their work with Llano Grande—provided solid suggestions, insight and response to the initial conversations on school transformation.

Many of the proposed plans to be incorporated into these school district re-design initiatives include having student-led workshops and seminars with educators, as well as training where students, teachers, and parents will learn together about ways to incorporate voice and community into the learning process.

Closing reflections

These are significant steps being taken to facilitate the growth of youth voice and agency into the educational sphere. We realize the need to continue the dialogue and work with a different mode of thought that looks to youth and adult partnerships as the guiding model. Without youth voice, it becomes evident that research remains one-sided, with professional educators continuing to struggle to find ways to teach. Our work and collaborative inquiry process validate the critical importance of grounding and informing work in a historical and cultural context. In addition, it is essential to create spaces and conditions for youth to work side-by side with responsible and committed adults. A successful emerging framework is an intergenerational process that is interdependent and focused on exploring and surfacing new experiences and strategies for responding to local social issues. These partnerships have begun to redefine teaching and learning and have become knowledge-creation ventures. These experiences have also yielded new leadership opportunities and sources of power. They do not happen by accident, and institutions typically do not engender these opportunities unless we step away from traditional norms and redefine the roles and contributions youth can have in our institutions of education.

We appreciate the work in this volume and the strategies put forth, but we must advocate for a new type of research that is collaborative and places young people in the knowledge-creation process. This is why we position the stories of youth as well as their ideas and power at the forefront of this discourse. We see this edition as a critically important vehicle for beginning this discourse and advocate for a more constant inclusion of youth voices in our research, practice, and policy development.