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Use, Capture, and Value of Student Voice in Schools

Findings from the 2021 Learn Together Surveys

Providing an avenue for students to share their perceptions and opinions of their learning environment with educators makes the process of teaching and learning more reciprocal and can address issues of inequity by giving students the opportunity to participate in and influence decisions that will affect their lives and those of their peers (Cook-Sather, 2021; Mitra, Conner, and Holquist, 2021). Students' perceptions, as captured through student surveys, have been found to predict

student achievement; some evidence suggests that positive student perceptions of teacher practice are correlated with achievement gains in math and English language arts (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, undated). When asked to voice their perceptions, students can provide insights into information and relationships that adults in the school do not have access to, while also generating higher levels of student engagement in learning (Steiner et al., undated). Furthermore, the act of participating in school decisionmaking itself can also improve students' academic achievement and civic skills (Mager and Nowak, 2012).

In this Data Note, we use nationally representative survey response data from 6th- to 12th-grade teachers and school leaders in the American Educator Panels who completed the 2021 Learn Together Surveys (LTS) to examine the extent to which secondary teachers and school leaders take student voice into account in their practices at the classroom and school levels.¹ Specifically, we look at three aspects of the relationship between adults and students in schools through the *capture*, *use*, and *value* of student voice.

The LTS were administered in March and April 2021, about one year into the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, during which time most secondary students received at least some remote instruction (Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021). Therefore, it was important to explore how

Key Findings

- Nearly all school leaders captured student voice and used multiple strategies, especially informal conversations and student surveys, to do so.
- Student voice informed instructional and social and emotional learning approaches.
- Leaders of schools that provided in-person instruction during the 2020–2021 school year reported placing greater emphasis on capturing student voice than did leaders whose schools provided fully remote or hybrid instruction.
- Teachers and school leaders reported that student voice has high value in their schools, but low influence.

For the purposes of the LTS, we defined *student voice* as student agency in shaping their educational experiences. The survey items about this topic ask about the ways in which student voice is collected, the opportunities available for student voice to affect adults' decisions, and the perceived value of student voice within the school.

student voice and input were captured in schools and to determine how adults valued and used student voice to inform school and classroom decisions.² The topic of student voice has become especially relevant because of instructional changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the adoption of remote or hybrid instruction, which could reduce the opportunities for in-person interactions between teachers and students, particularly in high-poverty and rural districts (Hodgman, Sabatini, and Carminucci, 2021). This Data Note considers four main research questions:

1. How are schools capturing student voice and to what extent is student input representative of students in the school?
2. To what extent do teachers and school leaders use student voice in their classroom and school decisionmaking?
3. Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the level of emphasis that schools place on capturing student voice?
4. To what extent do teachers and school leaders value student voice and generate opportunities for students to influence what happens in classrooms and schools?

We explore teacher and school leader responses by school-level subgroup (e.g., race/ethnicity of the student population, percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch [FRPL]) to see how the capture, use, and value of student voice varies according to the educational context. We conclude with implications and policy recommendations.

Nearly All School Leaders Captured Student Voice and Used Multiple Strategies to Do So

Although nearly all school leaders (98 percent) indicated that their schools captured student voice, the ways in which student voice was captured varied. We asked school leaders to select from six possible strategies that they used in their schools to capture student voice, marking all applicable options (see Figure 1). Most school leaders used multiple strategies—three, on average—to capture student voice in their schools. Very few school leaders (2 percent) reported that their school did not capture student voice. Middle school leaders used fewer strategies to capture student voice (three, on average) than high school leaders (four, on average).

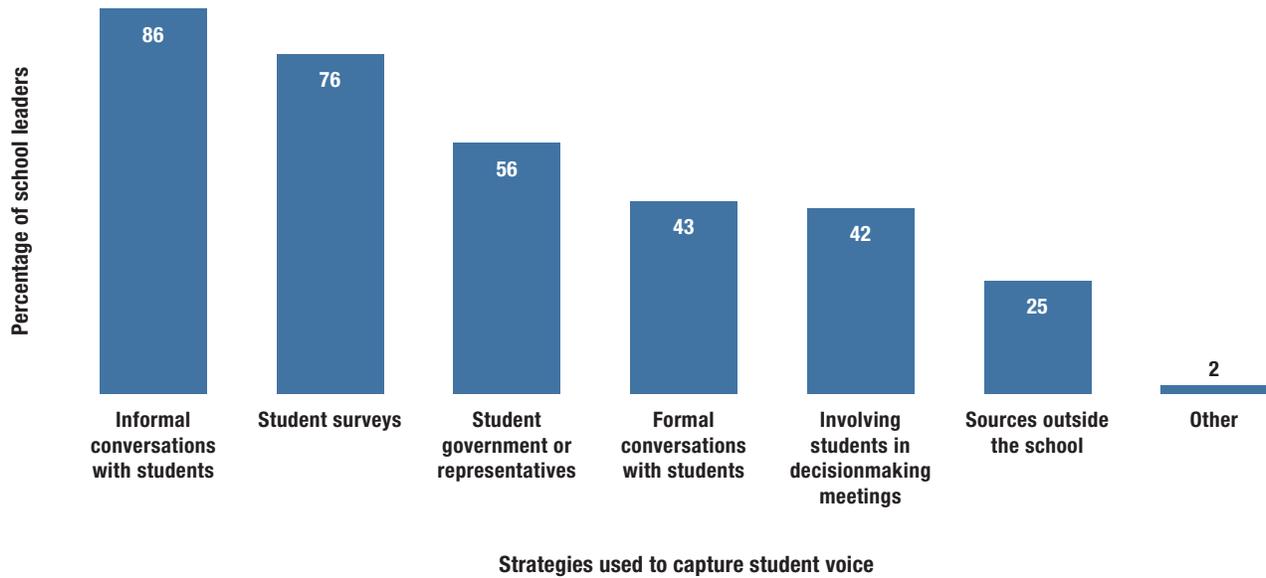
We also asked school leaders what proportion of the students in their school were represented by the student voice data that they captured. More than half of school leader respondents (58 percent) reported that student voice data represented the views of most or all of their students, and only 16 percent said that collected student voice data represented none or few of their students. Among principals who said their data represented most or all of their students, their most-used strategies were informal conversations (90 percent) and surveys (85 percent).

School Leaders Tended to Use Informal Conversations and Student Surveys to Capture Student Voice

As shown in Figure 1, school leaders reported capturing student voice most commonly through informal conversations and student surveys. They tended to rely less on formal methods, such as focus groups or student panels, or on institutionalized channels, such as student government or participation in student councils and in decisionmaking meetings. Only 25 percent of school leaders reported using sources outside the school (e.g., social media, surveys conducted by other organizations). Informal conversations and surveys were the strategies that school leaders used the most individually (i.e., not in

FIGURE 1

School Leaders Used Multiple Strategies to Capture Student Voice



NOTE: The results in this figure are based on the following survey question to school leaders: “Please select all the strategies that your school uses to capture student voice, whether virtual or in person.” Respondents were instructed to “select all that apply,” so percentages will not sum to 100 percent ($n = 1,651$). All pairwise comparisons are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, other than the difference between the “formal conversations with students” and “involving students in decisionmaking meetings” strategies.

combination with other strategies): Of those principals who used only one strategy to capture student voice, 45 percent of principals used informal conversations and 30 percent used surveys. On the other hand, school leaders tended to use formal conversations, student involvement in decisionmaking meetings, and sources outside the school in combination with other strategies.

The combination of formal and informal methods can help overcome some of the limitations each one presents individually. For example, surveys can address issues of representation inherent in informal interactions by increasing the number of students who can participate, while conversations allow for more-nuanced responses and can promote engagement (Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey, 2019; Mitra, Conner, and Holquist, 2021). The heavy reliance on student surveys is possibly connected to the required use of this type of data collection method as part of state and local teacher evaluation or accountability systems. As of 2019, 31 states used or encouraged the

use of student surveys as one measure to evaluate their teachers (Ross and Walsh, 2019).

High school leaders tended to rely more than middle school leaders did on structured methods to capture student voice, such as student surveys, formal conversations with students, and student government. Less structured methods, such as informal conversations, were used equally by leaders at both school levels. High school leaders reported that they involved students in decisionmaking more than middle school leaders did (57 percent and 33 percent, respectively). Using students’ FRPL eligibility as a proxy for school poverty level when comparing survey results, we found that leaders of schools with high FRPL enrollment (i.e., schools having 75 percent or more FRPL-eligible students) were less likely to use less structured methods—for example, informal conversations—to capture student voice than leaders of schools with low FRPL enrollment (80 percent and 90 percent, respectively). Additionally, leaders of schools

with high FRPL enrollment tended to rely less on representative methods, such as student government, to capture student voice than did their peers who led schools with low FRPL enrollment (48 percent and 65 percent, respectively).

Leaders of Schools That Provided In-Person Instruction During the 2020–2021 School Year Reported Placing Greater Emphasis on Capturing Student Voice Than Did Leaders Whose Schools Provided Fully Remote or Hybrid Instruction

Overall, 45 percent of teachers and 46 percent of school leaders declared that the COVID-19 pandemic led them to place less emphasis on capturing student voice, while 28 percent of teachers and 25 of school leaders indicated that their emphasis remained the same as the prepandemic level. Finally, 29 percent of teachers and 27 percent of school leaders stated that the pandemic led them to place more emphasis on capturing student voice than they did before the pandemic.

The LTS allowed us to examine the relationship between a school’s instructional model (in-person, remote, and hybrid) and the change in emphasis placed on capturing student voice. School leaders who indicated that their schools used fully remote or hybrid instruction for most of the 2020–2021 school year reported reducing their emphasis on capturing student voice more than did school leaders who indicated that their schools offered in-person instruction for most of that school year. Teachers and leaders in schools using in-person instruction were most likely to report that the COVID-19 pandemic had no impact on their school’s emphasis on capturing student voice. It is possible that the challenges of implementing remote and hybrid instruction models demanded most of the adults’ attention, leaving less time for activities that would elicit student voice. Additionally, it is possible that remote or hybrid environments led to fewer opportunities

to capture student voice by reducing opportunities for one-to-one interactions. Considering schools’ past reliance on student surveys to capture student voice provides another possible explanation for this reported decrease in the level of emphasis placed on capturing student voice. Existing surveys might not be as relevant for remote or hybrid instructional models (e.g., they might be centered on experiences inside the school or classroom that do not translate to online contexts). Thus, the frequency of survey administration also could have decreased during the pandemic.

The pandemic also may have influenced the representativeness of student voice. School leaders whose schools offered fully in-person instruction for most of the 2020–2021 school year reported that they heard from more students than did school leaders whose schools used hybrid instruction for most of the 2020–2021 school year.

Student Voice Informed Instructional and Social and Emotional Learning Approaches

The LTS asked teachers to identify the extent to which they used student voice to inform decision-making in different areas inside their classrooms. In general, teachers were most likely to consider student voice in decisions related to their instructional approaches (69 percent) and social and emotional learning (SEL) approaches (58 percent). Approximately half of teachers surveyed indicated that student voice informed decisions related to the content that they teach and the discipline policies used in their classrooms. Student voice had the least influence when it comes to grading; 28 percent of teachers indicated that student voice did not influence grading policies. These results indicate that student voice might have the most influence on how teachers teach academic subjects and approach non-academic skill-building. Together, these practices can contribute to learning environments that are adapted to student needs (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012).

Teachers and Leaders Reported That Student Voice Has High Value but Low Influence

As indicated in Figure 2, a large majority of teachers and school leaders reportedly respect student voice and listen to students when making decisions. However, this does not necessarily translate into influence—a lower proportion of teachers and school leaders indicated that students speak up and that student voice affects what happens in the school.

Although student voice was valued by a large majority of teachers and school leaders across school types, more teachers and leaders in schools with low FRPL enrollment tended to report highly valuing student voice than did teachers and leaders in schools with high FRPL enrollment (i.e., schools with 75 percent or more FRPL-eligible students). This difference appears particularly pronounced in teachers’ and school leaders’ perceptions of whether

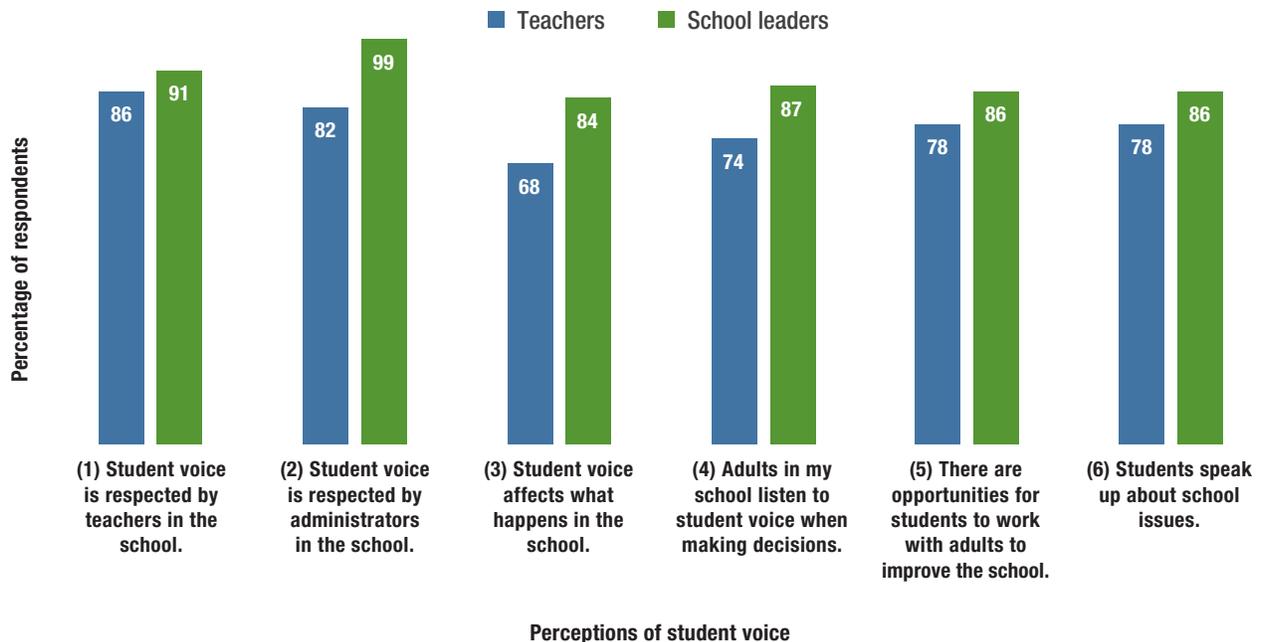
their students speak up about school issues: Seventy-three percent of teachers and 85 percent of principals in schools with high FRPL enrollment agreed that their students speak up about school issues, compared with 84 percent of teachers and 90 percent of principals in schools with low FRPL enrollment.

Implications and Recommendations

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting increase in remote learning, student voice can provide insights into student experiences and help educators adapt the school environment to meet student needs. The opportunities for school leaders to capture student voice through informal conversations might have decreased with remote instruction because there were fewer opportunities in which these interactions could occur. This Data Note

FIGURE 2

Student Voice Has More Respect Than Influence



NOTE: The results in this figure are based on teacher and school leader responses to the following survey question: “Indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements” ($n = 3,551$ teachers; $n = 1,649$ school leaders). Percentages of respondents reflect the combined responses of teachers and school leaders who indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. Among teachers, all pairwise comparisons are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, other than the difference between response options 5 and 6. Among principals, all pairwise comparisons are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, other than the differences of the pairwise comparisons between two combinations of response options (4, 5, and 6 versus 3, 5, and 6).

highlights secondary school leaders' and teachers' use, capture, and value of student voice by summarizing key findings from the 2021 LTS results data.

Drawing from these findings, we suggest the following strategies that local, state, and federal policymakers could pursue to increase the importance of student voice in secondary schools, particularly to strive toward more equitable teaching and learning environments:

- **Encourage school leaders to expand the use of representative and engaging methods to capture student voice.** Although almost 70 percent of school leaders combined informal conversations and surveys to capture student voice, they could use other strategies that are not employed as frequently, such as formal conversations (e.g., focus groups, student panels) to ensure higher levels of participation from all students, particularly from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, while also fostering relationships between adults and students.
- **Increase school- and classroom-level efforts to incorporate student voice into decisionmaking.** Survey results indicate that adults in secondary schools tend to consider student voice in a limited number of decisions, leaving space for greater consideration of student input in a wider range of school and classroom decisions. For example, incorporating student voice into grading and assessment (e.g., through student self-reflection on their grades) can lead to more-equitable evaluation of learning, affording students the possibility to demonstrate their capacities (Cook-Sather, 2021).
- **Encourage emphasis on capturing student voice as remote learning increases.** Overall, the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to decrease schools' emphasis on capturing student voice, especially in remote-learning environments. Because it is likely that many schools will retain some

form of remote-learning environment after the pandemic (Schwartz et al., 2020), student input can help adults find solutions to problems that arise with this new model. Additionally, promoting student voice can increase student engagement when there is less in-person interaction (Ferren, 2021).

- **Focus on increasing the influence of student voice, especially in secondary schools with high FRPL enrollment.** The gap between the reported levels of valuing and influence of student voice is particularly marked in schools where 75 percent or more of students were eligible for FRPL. Fostering and listening to student voice is a tool that can reduce the inequities in education that these students experience by providing opportunities for all students to voice their concerns and to actively shape their education. Moreover, this can lead to more-diverse educational experiences and improvements in school climate (Cook-Sather, 2021).

Limitations

All measures described here refer to secondary teachers' and school leaders' self-reported perceptions of student voice in their schools. Some items required respondents to evaluate their own behaviors, attitudes, and opinions, and this could have led them to create a more positive image that might not accurately reflect reality. The LTS did not include students, so there is no way to compare these responses with students' views of how student voice influences their educational experiences. The nature of the data allows us to analyze differences across schools; comparisons within the same school are not possible. Therefore, differences reported between teacher and principal respondents do not necessarily reflect the different experiences of teachers and school leaders from the same school.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

In this Data Note, we used responses from 3,605 6th- to 12th-grade teachers and 1,686 middle and high school leaders who completed the 2021 LTS. Responses were weighted to generate nationally representative percentages for each survey item. More information about the survey methodology, weighting procedures, and descriptive tables for LTS questions can be found in the LTS Technical Documentation and Survey Results (Young et al., 2021).

We compared teacher and school leader responses across various school-level characteristics, including instructional mode, school FRPL enrollment, and race/ethnicity of the student population. School demographic characteristics were obtained from the 2019–20 National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data, and the mode of instruction (in-person, hybrid, or remote), respondents' race/ethnicity, and classroom-level percentage of students' race/ethnicity were obtained from 2021 LTS response data. We conducted *t*-tests to test for significant pairwise differences among categories on each school- or classroom-level characteristic. All comparisons made in this Data Note are unadjusted for statistical controls and are significant at the $p < 0.05$ level unless otherwise specified.

Notes

¹ School leaders and teachers who responded to the LTS do not necessarily come from the same school, as both groups are sampled separately. The comparisons presented here are across schools (i.e., among teachers and among principals, separately), and any differences between school leaders and teachers should be interpreted with caution as both groups might represent different educational contexts.

² This was the first time the topic of student voice was included in the LTS, so it is not possible to compare 2021 responses with earlier responses.

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About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country.

We are extremely grateful to the educators who have agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences are invaluable for this effort and for helping us understand how to better support their hard work in schools. We also thank Jill Cannon, Ryan Balch, and Jon Schweig for helpful feedback that greatly improved this report.

RAND Education and Labor

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. This report is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this Data Note or about the Learn Together Surveys should be directed to qdoan@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

About the Data Note Series

This Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of teacher and school leader survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please see the *Learn Together Surveys: 2021 Technical Documentation and Survey Results* (RR-A827-2, www.rand.org/t/RR-A827-2) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own analysis or reading other AEP-related publications, please email aep@rand.org or visit www.rand.org/aep.

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