Voice Matters:
Uncovering systemic barriers to school improvement through voice circles

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Introduction

As educators, we often think we should know all the answers. Sometimes we approach our work thinking we do have all the answers. We, collectively as educators, must take the opportunity to be open to listening to our students, families, and communities without making assumptions or acting on preconceived notions. We must be willing to learn and to be uncomfortable in the space of not knowing the answers. Above all else, we must act in partnership with those who have been historically marginalized by our systems. We do this by listening and acting in partnership with students, families, and communities.

What is a Voice Circle?

This guide provides step-by-step guidance on conducting a voice circle; a high leverage, responsive strategy to listen to students, families, and community members to create the change needed. Voice circles are guided conversations. In a voice circle, carefully and thoughtfully structured questions are used to guide meaningful dialogue that encourages student voice and agency. Guests reveal the actions needed to improve the school experience for ALL students.

Voice circles allow us to engage with those who have not had a voice or a place at the table. The process can surface student and family experiences that are counter to our intent as educators and can be emotional. This is normal. Allow for space to process and provide grace to each other as we lean in together to create more equitable education systems.

Voices of any individual or group will not surface unless there is a safe environment that has been thoughtfully created and nurtured. People need to feel comfortable to share their stories and lived experience. Most importantly, authentic voice is found by providing the space and place for those voices that have been absent to finally surface. It is about actively encouraging, embracing, and honoring those who have been historically or previously marginalized.

The guide is divided into ten detailed steps. It explains setting up and running a successful event and ends with how to analyze the information gathered from the voice circles to create meaningful change.

"We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know."

- *Carl Rogers, American psychologist, and a founder of the humanistic approach*

Warning: Proceed with Caution

This guide and the tools found within it come with a warning. It is important to understand this guide should be acted upon as a cohesive whole to experience success. This guide is not meant

to be used "a la carte," since leaving out some steps may create unintended harm for both the guests and those who are assisting.

It is important to note that how we ask for feedback is as important as the feedback itself. We have an opportunity to build an environment of trust. For this reason, we do not enter voice circles without clear procedures, background knowledge, and above all else, care. This guide will help you do that.

Responses from a voice circle will capture actionable items. Some actions could mean a simple shift in a policy or procedure while others are of a systemic nature and will require additional time and resources. The barriers to school improvement processes will surface. These barriers and the actions that accompany them will require the attention and intention of our entire system.

What is Student Voice?

There are numerous definitions of the concept of "voice." For this document, the following definitions and quotes guide our perception of student and family voice.

> Voice is sharing thoughts and ideas in an environment underpinned by trust and respect, offering realistic suggestions for the good of the whole, and accepting responsibility for not only what is said but also what needs to be done (Quaglia Institute, *Voice Definition: A School Voice Brief* 2020).

> Student and family voice can be defined as the ways in which students and/or their families have opportunities to indirectly or directly participate in and influence education decisions that shape students' learning (Holquist & Porter, 2020).

Why Student Voice?

The benefits of student voice have been measured for decades by experts in the field. Comparing the Quaglia Institute's research and that of John Hattie highlights the power involved in feedback and how it impacts student engagement (Hattie, J., & Clarke, S. 2019. *Visible learning: Feedback*. Routledge).

For example:

- Students with a strong sense of student voice are 7 times more likely to be academically motivated.

- Students with a strong sense of engagement are 16 times more likely to be academically motivated.

- Feedback is most powerful when it is from the student to the teacher.

- When teachers seek, or at least are open to, feedback from students about what students know, what they understand, where they make errors, when they have misconceptions, when they are engaged; then teaching and learning can be synchronized and powerful.

The true stakeholders in education are our students. Yet they have had little to no voice or input regarding how their schools and their instruction is designed or delivered. The importance of student voice is a documented and proven indicator of excellence when it comes to teaching and learning frameworks. Engaging students in decision-making processes, such as school improvement planning, is an opportunity to surface ideas for change that directly respond to students' education experience. Including student voice assists in creating a more equitable and inclusive school by re-engaging disenfranchised youth and marginalized communities both inside and outside our brick-and-mortar walls.

Deciding Which Student Voice Strategy is Best

Voice Circle vs Survey vs 1:1

Deciding on whether a voice circle is warranted or is the correct tool depends on what you are hoping to learn and who the learning will impact. Voice circles and surveys can appear to be similar approaches but have differing impacts on those asked to participate. For example, surveys feel less personal but can be a great tool to understand overarching trends occurring in our schools. Surveys can provide the data to surface questions about the root cause of why the data are trending a certain way. These trends can serve as a basis for a voice circle.

Consider the following points when determining when to administer a survey, hold a voice circle, or meet with a student in a 1:1 conversation.

Survey

Feedback is needed from an entire group or population. The information could need to be gathered in a short period of time and used in comparison to a previous survey. The results could also be compared across groups of students, grade levels, schools, or districts for patterns and trends.

Voice Circle

Uncovers the root cause of an issue or topic. Responses may reveal barriers or systemic issues for a group of students or a community. Analyzing responses for commonalities may also provide potential solutions.

1:1 Conversations

The purpose has great specificity and could involve only a few students. It could be for the purpose of building a relationship or finding out more about an individual.

What is your Reason for Holding a Voice Circle?

What is leading you to want to hold a listening session? A listening session can take place with students, families, staff, or community members for a variety of reasons. The following list represents a small sample:

- Results from a survey. There is a need to dig deeper to fully understand
- Academic Data Reports
- Attendance Data, Policies, Procedures
- School Improvement Planning
- Community-based Issues
- Adoption of Curriculum
- Feedback on an Initiative
- Health and/or Safety Concerns
- Behavior or Social Emotional Needs
- Student, Parent, Staff, Community Identified Topic
- Transitional Years in School, Pre–K, 5–6, 8–9
- Uncover hidden needs that are not being met within the system

What Can we Learn from Voice Circles?

Secondary Student Quotes

The following responses were collected from a student voice circle held at an alternative school. Students were asked to reflect on their experience with a voice circle.

- "One of the biggest Ah-Ha's is that they (adults) are trying to get closer to us and get to know us. We want more circles like this one."

- "I am excited about the changes that can be made with the students AND teachers working together."

- "I liked being able to talk about my school."

- "One of our group mates said we should have more hands-on learning moments in class. I never thought of that. I think it would be great!"

- "It was more of what I thought than what the teachers thought."

- "Can we have one every Friday? We don't even need a topic. We can just talk."

- "I liked having a say in what can and is going to change."

- "Having more circles will help build relationships."

- "I liked being able to share my thoughts about things I don't like. It made me feel lighter."

Some might believe that student voice circles have a greater impact in secondary schools, but elementary-level student voice circles are just as revealing. The following responses were collected from a student voice circle held at an elementary school. The purpose of the event was for the new principal to learn about the school through the students' eyes and to surface any barriers to improvement practices.

Question	
What would make ___Elementary a place where more students would say, "I want to go to that school"?	If students would just stop caring about looks, clothes, or shoes.
Many students are absent. Why might students not want to come to our school?	Kids make fun of other people's reading level (Example-2R) Went to hotel, car broke down, no bus, missed the bus and had to walk. Drama at school-rumors-people talking. Don't have a lot of friends. Don't want to be alone.
Why do you think students are tardy to school?	Watching siblings (younger). Mom and dad work nights. Parents get home too late. Didn't get enough sleep. Have to care for younger siblings (make bottle and change diaper).
Think about your favorite teacher. Without using his or her name, tell me what makes the teacher one of your favorites?	Caring. When hands are cold, she lets you borrow gloves. When alone at recess, this teacher comes out and will ask if anything is wrong and then we walk around together. If students say something related to a song, the teacher starts singing. Kids do anything to get her to stop.
Is there anything you would like to see changed at our school?	Let us write if we get too mad. Let us take breaks. If you have a bad day don't take it out on us.
What can we do to help students learn at _____ Elementary?	Stop the bullying. Some are scared to raise hand because they will be made fun of at recess. Make math fun. Ask us more questions to know if we learned it. More science. More PE. Sometimes our parents don't culturally understand our homework.

Voice Circle: At-a-Glance

The guidance and details needed to conduct a successful voice circle are in the next section. The following table provides a 10,000 ft. view for the process of a student voice circle.

At-a-Glance: Steps for a Successful Event: Before Stage

Steps	Considerations
1. Select and gather the planning team	Select 5–8 adults who are viewed as caring adults by students. Gather the team at least 4–6 weeks prior to the event. These adults are on the planning team but can also serve as champions for the tables. From pre-planning to execution to wrap-up, make sure the planning team is engaged with the entire process.
2. Determine the purpose.	Are you using data or results from a survey or a report as the wondering? Gather it to share with the planning team.
3. Co-create questions	Questions should pertain to the purpose. The planning team establishes a draft of questions that should be reviewed by an equity team at the school, district, or region.
4. Invite students or guests	Include invitations to students who have not had a voice in the school, program, or system. Obtain permission from parents/guardians to participate in a confidential listening session.
5. Train the champions	Provide a training for all who are assisting at the event. It should include a discussion of expectations and the role of implicit bias. It should take place the day before or day of the event. Provide training to students on what the voice circle is, how their voice will be used to create change, expectations for participation, and how to excuse themselves if uncomfortable. Consider including information on student leadership and additional opportunities to use their voices for change.

At-a-Glance: Steps for a Successful Event: During Stage

6. Welcome the audience (students)	As the audience is welcomed by the facilitator, consider utilizing the "Voice Circle" slide deck to highlight the "why" behind the gathering and to express gratitude for those who are participating as guests. A sample slide deck is located at www.systems4support.com
7. Circle Time!	This is the time when the educator becomes the learner, and the learner becomes the teacher. The facilitator is circulating and serving as a timekeeper.
8. Conclusion of voice circle	Thank guests for participating and provide the directions for any exit questions. Champions write a

	thank you note to the students at their tables prior to leaving for the debrief.

At-a-Glance: Steps for a Successful Event: After Stage

9. Champion team debrief	Champions gather to debrief the event with the debrief document located at www.systems4support.com
10. Determine next steps	Develop a plan for communicating with students regarding actions and/or next steps. How will the learning be shared? Will staff be the creators of an action plan or students? Will it involve a true partnership between educators and students? Consider reconvening your students to inform your progress.

What is a Champion?

A champion is a caring adult who authentically shows up to not only listen and learn but to partner with students. A champion works to surface the barriers to continuous improvement and develop action plans to address those barriers. Champions hold the mirror up to the system, not the student. A champion will face it and fix it, together, with students.

Before Voice Circles (Steps 1–5)

Step 1. Select and Gather the Team

The participants play a pivotal role in the success of the event as they serve as the planning and implementation team. It is important to have the roles and responsibilities well defined from the beginning. Champions can serve on the planning and implementation team and serve in their role as a champion on the day of the event. The facilitator for the event makes the final decision on who serves in which role.

Roles

Facilitator: The facilitator is the lead for the event. They serve as the master of ceremonies. The facilitator should not be assigned a table and should be circulating amongst tables and acting as a process person and timekeeper.

Champions: At least 1 person per table. The champion is the caring adult who serves as the table host at a voice circle. This person champions the voice of those at the table.

Planning Team: 4–6 team members. The Planning Team is comprised of the adults who were invited to the planning meeting and will be taking part in the event either as a champion or as a support person.

Responsibilities

Role	Before	During	After
Facilitator	*Takes the lead for the event. *Identifies 5–8 caring adults to attend the first planning meeting at least 4–6 weeks prior to the event. *Facilitates the first planning meeting and any additional meetings for the planning team. *Trains the designated champions. *Works with the planning team to identify enough caring adults for the number of guests attending the event. One adult will be needed for every 3–4 guests at a table. *Assists with the development of questions for the voice circle.	*Serves as the master of ceremonies, welcoming the guests with a slide deck outlining the purpose for the event, reviews expectations, and expresses gratitude to all for attending. *Monitors the voice circle event by continuing to circulate, answering questions that arise, and serving as a timekeeper.	*Facilitates the "team debrief" immediately following the event. *After the debrief, gathers all documents and oversees placing them into 1 document without names listed (unless it is a positive) *Takes the lead on the action planning and monitoring of progress. *Monitors continued communication and involvement with guests.
Champions	*Attends the planning meetings. *Assists with the various tasks identified within the planning meeting for the voice circle *Attends the pre-circle training specific to his or her role and led by the facilitator.	*Arrives at the event early to assist with set-up and to prepare the table where their guests will be seated. Welcome all guests with a positive demeanor and a smile. *Leads a pre-determined icebreaker, taking a turn first to put others at ease. *Captures the responses in an accurate manner, stating the facts, not adding to or embellishing, and remaining vigilant about the potential impact of personal implicit bias	*Writes a thank you to each guest who was located at their table. *Attends the "team debrief" immediately following the event. *Provides the responses from the table to the facilitator. *Honors the stories of others by keeping them confidential unless there is a health or safety concern. *Supports the facilitator with any next steps or meetings related to action planning.
Planning Team	*Attends the planning meeting. *Assists with the various tasks as they are assigned in the planning meeting.	*Arrives at the event early or at the designated time to assist with set-up or to attend to the specific tasks if you are a champion.	*Thanks guests as they depart. *Assists with clean up.

When considering the composition of the planning team, which will include the champions, be thoughtful. Each person has a critically important role in the success of the event. The team should consist of adults who are:

- Excited to be part of the process

- Have sufficient time to fully participate in the entire process

- Viewed as a caring adult by students

For a student voice circle, you will want adults serving as champions who are viewed as caring adults by the students. Often, the school counselor or school psychologist are perfect choices. The key is to think about the staff who students view as adults they can speak to. Considering the purpose for the voice circle as you select adults can also lead to the selection of champions. Know the students who are being invited and ensure there are specialists included for students with disabilities and those who serve multilingual learners. Work to avoid putting a student in the position of answering a question in the presence of someone who the student is not comfortable speaking to. The student voice circle is always about the students. This is an opportunity for staff who have positive views of students to be champions for them in another way.

Several areas of logistics should be identified in preplanning meetings with the team.

Technology and shared documents: Technology considerations include laptops for recording student responses, presentation equipment for introductory slides or speakers who set the stage for the event, extension cords, handheld recorders for accuracy, and FERPA compliant storage space for saving student responses. Also, consider any translation services you might need for documents that are distributed to students and families.

Relationships, communication, audience: Identify who will be inviting the guests and developing the invitations, announcements, permission forms, and other communication needs. If translation services are needed, this person will schedule interpreters. You may also consider having a team member take photos.

Environment: Identify where the event will take place and reserve the space early. Verify the availability of tables, chairs, space for sign-in, and food/beverages. Check that restrooms will be accessible. Consider having music playing before and after the circle.

Supplies/Materials/Food: Identify the types of supplies that will be needed, such as pens, pencils, paper, name tags, butcher paper on each table for free thought. Have bottled water, candy, mints, etc., at each table. Include a sign-in sheet to capture names to provide feedback to all guests.

Set the agenda: Allow for at least 30 minutes to meet with the adults to review the expectations and 30 minutes with the students to review their role and expectations. Allow sufficient time for an icebreaker for students and adults to get to know each other through fun or silly questions

prior to the circle. Depending on the question, allow approximately 1–2 minutes for each participant to respond. Analyze how many questions will be asked and the time needed for each voice to be heard. A general rule is to allow 2–3 minutes per student at a table to answer each question but allow extra time for more complicated questions. Plan for a 30-minute debrief with adults after the circle. This should occur directly after the circle while the information is still fresh. Additional time to identify action plans for change should be scheduled for future dates once the adults have time to process the information they learned.

Step 2. Determine your Purpose

There are specific steps for incorporating voice circles at the classroom, school, or district level. Paying attention to the messaging and purpose of each step as outlined in this guide will result in improved relationships and trust among those engaged in the process. As educators, we realize the critical importance of developing caring relationships. Relationships have the power to transform classrooms, schools, and systems. It cannot be stressed enough that relationships are at the center of everything related to voice circles.

As you determine the purpose for the event, consider if your school or districts needs to explore a survey or data point that a voice circle can help you understand better.

Suggested Topics for Voice Circles
Consider these options:

- Attendance: Designed to explore the root cause of attendance-related barriers. They will surface issues regarding equity. Participants: students, community, parents/guardians, staff, and/or attendance clerks.

- Pay it Forward: End of the year, quarter, semester gathering designed to reflect on learning and inform the future. Examples: What are the take-aways, and how do we take action on our learning?

- Feedback Loop: An opportunity to bring forth several issues, thoughts, ideas in a small group setting. Topics are placed at different tables and guests can spend time at tables of choice. Topics can be chosen ahead of time through a brief survey. Examples: A variety of topics such as homework, standards-based grading, school activities, mental health support, etc.

- Partners in Improvement: Gathering specifically designed for continuous improvement efforts. Data (contextual, perceptual, achievement, demographic) are used to paint a portion of the picture with guests providing the complete picture (the "other" data) regarding current reality and next steps. Action planning is an outcome. Examples: School improvement, progress monitoring checks, specific student groups who are typically not the voices being heard.

- Disrupting the Single Story: A gathering designed to provide a safe space for participants to share their stories and experiences. By listening and learning, assumptions surface that can be discussed, plans can be developed, and actions designed to address the new learning. Examples: Provide a safe space to truly listen to the stories of a school or of a community. Focus on providing the space for historically marginalized populations to share their experiences. "The Danger of the Single Story" TED video featuring Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie is an excellent way to begin the time together. It will lead you to discuss the single stories that exist and what we can and should do to disrupt them.

- Focused: Gathering designed to focus on a specific topic, content, etc., to capture the expertise of guests. Examples: Curriculum adoptions, behavior support, social-emotional, etc.

- Scholar or Student: Gathering designed to provide a safe space for students to provide feedback and to partner with adults to improve the school experience. Action planning is an outcome. Examples: Feedback on specific topics, data source, student generated topics, etc.

- Transitions: Gathering specifically designed to either look to the upcoming transitions for students between levels or to reflect on the past transitions (Pre–1, 5–6, 8–9, 12). By holding a voice circle after the transition between levels has taken place, the lived stories can be leveraged to improve the experience for students at critically important junctures within the educational system. Holding this voice circle with students or parents and guardians would provide powerful information.

Whose perspective and feedback are you looking for?

Potential Participants (Honored Guests):

- Student/Scholar: Student-focused gathering based on a data point, authentic wondering, or any topic related to learning from our scholars. Action planning is an expected outcome. Examples: Use as an opportunity to capture solutions based on climate, attendance, instruction, etc.

- Parent/Guardian or Community: Gathering based on problem solving on topic of concern. Examples: Parent/guardian or community safety topic, emergency preparedness, topic based on a survey, community concern, etc.

- Staff: Gathering with staff members to gather feedback on specific topics. Examples: Consider holding a circle with bus drivers, attendance clerks, or paraeducators as they provide excellent, often untapped insight.

Determine the Format

After it has been determined that a voice circle is needed, there are initial steps that can be taken to set up a successful event. The following questions are for reflection by a school administrator, leadership team, committee, etc. The next steps will become apparent through thoughtfully considering the following.

- What is a wondering you have about your school or district that you do not have the answer to right now?

- If you had the true answer to your wondering and were able to address it through an action plan, what would it look like and sound like for it to be considered a brilliant success to you and the guests at your event?

- Is your wondering based on a survey or data report for students, staff, parents/ guardians, or community members?

- Who does the data involve? Who lives closest to the data or wondering?

- Who will be the guests for your voice circle? Will it be students, staff, parents/guardians, or community members?

- How will you ensure the voices are invited to the table who will provide the entire story? How will you include those who have been historically marginalized by a system?

Note: any of the gatherings can be used in an online platform.

Step 3. Co-create Questions

The Single Story

Stories are not just found in voice circles; they happen any time data is viewed through our lens as an educator. The brain naturally attempts to construct meaning out of what we are presented and attaches a reason and explanation based on our assumptions and experiences. The data can be viewed in different ways to confirm our personal narrative of the story. The problem with these stories is that we only own a portion of the story, i.e., the single story, and without involving the faces and families behind the numbers, we are operating off an incomplete story.

It is critically important for us to understand what our single story is and how it impacts our notion of reality. Voice circles can serve as a mechanism to disrupt the stories being told, typically narrated by the dominant culture. Holding voice circles with our students, families, staff, and community members can and will change the trajectory of school improvement efforts.

Evidence comes in many forms. It can be represented numerically, such as the results from a math assessment, the percentage for chronic absenteeism, the number of office referrals, etc., but also includes stories such as the narrative feedback on a survey or a student's exit ticket from class, and the conversations from a voice circle. Numerical data is often the type of evidence that is the focus of analysis in schools. The analysis of the narrative data that results

from voice circles tends to fall into a category that is seldom analyzed. Keep in mind that data not analyzed is data not acted on. Issues not acted on show no improvement. If the data that lives closest to our students continues to not be examined, we have painted an incomplete picture, and true improvement won't be realized.

Levels of Data

In her 2017 book, "The Listening Leader," Shane Safir developed a framework called "The Levels of Data." It does an excellent job of putting the types of data, or evidence, available into a context that is easily understood. Safir organizes data into 3 levels, "satellite," "map," and "street level." Another excellent resource was released in 2021 by Safir and Dugan providing an in-depth examination of the power of street data (Safir & Dugan, 2021. *Street data: A next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation*).

- Level 1, "satellite" data, is considered a large grain size. It points us in the general direction and uncovers patterns of inequity and achievement related issues. Examples of this level of data are high stakes assessments our students take, such as our state-level tests that indicate achievement.

- Level 2, "map" data, is a medium grain size. It points us in a direction that is a bit more focused and can assist us with identifying instructional gaps. Examples of this data are the assessments taken on a schedule possibly 3–4 times per year in a specific content area or department.

- Level 3, "street level" data, is that fine or small grain size. This data helps uncover the experiences of students, staff, and families and reveals any misconceptions. It provides a roadmap for the next moves by providing a more complete picture. This is the evidence that surfaces in voice circles.

With all levels of data, the problem does not typically lie in the analysis of the data. The problem lies in the corresponding actions. It is important to move the actions from being driven solely out of compliance to involving curiosity, compassion, and a commitment to improvement.

Perceptual Data

The evidence gathered in voice circles can be referred to as perceptual data. Perceptual data is a type of "street level" data that should be incorporated into processes requiring the use of evidence to inform and drive change efforts. OSPI defines perceptual data as "evidence collected and organized into themes through the one-on-one process" and points out that this type of data can help "inform decision making at a much more powerful level than achievement data in helping a school that feels powerless to self-correct and invent systems to support learning" (OSPI, 2015). Perceptual data should be thoughtfully scaffolded into data collection plans as a key to improvement efforts rather than incorporated as an afterthought. "The use of perceptual evidence is perhaps the most powerful pivot point for creating rapid change in a school that perceives itself as powerless" (Powerless to Powerful, Salina, p. 52).

Barriers to Collecting Perceptual Data

Barriers for collecting perceptual data commonly include comments such as:

- "There is simply not enough time in the school year to make it happen."

- "We are judged on our test scores, so the focus needs to go there."

- "There is no one to organize the event."

- "How will we truly use the responses?"

- "If we can't get parents and guardians to come to school events, how will we get them to attend a voice circle?"

There is also the barrier that is thought of but seldom said or addressed. "What will happen to the balance of power if we ask for insight and advice from students?"

How schools or districts address the barriers to engaging with perceptual data differs. However, there must be a value attached to the data and a purpose for obtaining it. If system leaders do not understand how the data can impact the barriers to school improvement, they will not examine the data.

Two ways to realize the value of perceptual data include:

- Knowledge: Engage with specific training about perceptual data and the research that supports it.

- Experience: Take part in a voice circle and walk away from it with your own epiphany and share the experience with others.

The development of the questions has an enormous impact on the responses that will be received. Taking time to frame questions carefully is perhaps one of the most important steps to an effective voice circle. Keeping in mind that effective questions are framed to encourage guests to speak from their own lived experience.

Questions

When considering the questions for your session, please keep in mind the following suggestions with an understanding that you will be meeting with vulnerable populations. Meet with your school or district equity specialists to review the questions to check for any potential unintended harm. At all times, your guests must be aware that they can opt out of responding to a question.

- Is the vocabulary in your questions clear and simple?

- Are the questions open-ended to allow for deeper understanding and stories to surface?

- Did we avoid leading questions? Avoiding any questions that lead a participant to believe there is only one correct response is important.

- Did we avoid complex questions?

- Did we avoid negative questions?

- Did we begin with an easy question to set up the space as positive, inviting, and safe?

- Did we avoid questions that make assumptions?

- Do the questions encourage the guest to speak from their own lived experience?

- "In the Moment" Questions: The champion needs to fully understand the questions prior to the session. Examples of probing questions for during the session can be found below.

  - Follow-up questions can be asked. Sentence stems can include:

    - "Can you tell me a little more about _____."

    - "Can you give me an example of_____."

    - "What happened next?"

  - Checking for understanding questions are appropriate. Sentence stems can include:

    - "Am I correct in thinking _____."

    - "Did you mean _____."

Silence

Silence or wait time can be viewed as a probing question strategy. Silence is always appropriate to allow for the interviewee to find their words, tell their story, make sense of the question, and establish meaning.

Behaviors

There are certain considerations for behaviors from the champion that create an environment of safety.

- Minimize distractions (put away cell phone and turn it off).

- Avoid interrupting the respondent.

- Avoid giving advice or opinions. Remember the interviewer assumes the role of learner.

- Consider your non-verbal communication, eye contact, body posture, etc.

- Put yourself in the shoes of the interviewee.

- Give respondents time to think.

- Avoid looking away from the respondent. Make it clear to respondents if you are writing it is because you want to capture their thoughts, ideas, recommendations, etc.

- Make sure you summarize or crystallize every so often.

- Ask yourself, who is saying more, the interviewer or the interviewee?

- Vary the volume and tone of your voice.

Step 4. Invite Students or Guests

Students should be selected based on the topic being explored and include students who have not typically had a voice in the school. Determine the grade level and the number of students being invited. Secure permission from the parent or guardian. There should be no more than 3–4 students at each table. Having students seated at a circular or kidney shaped table assists in the conversation so they can see each other. A nice "starter" size for a voice circle is 20–30 students. Consider the relationships between the students when it comes to seating arrangements. The goal is to foster a supportive environment.

When inviting the students, it is important to frame the circle through asset-based language. These are key opportunities to provide leadership opportunities for students who have been traditionally overlooked. Consider providing certificates to the students and highlighting their leadership role in school improvement efforts. Pre-circle trainings can include space for students to learn about continuous cycles of improvement and how to use their voice to create change.

Communication of the circles to the students and their families should include an acknowledgement of how the education system needs improvement to better meet the needs of all students and demonstrate a commitment from the school toward change. This can be done through the permission form required for student participation and/or informational meetings. Informational meetings should communicate the purpose of the circles and how the information gathered from students will be used to create change. Students and families are more familiar than ever with online platforms for meetings, which can alleviate the burden of travel and childcare for families to attend. Engage with the equity teams in your school, district, or region to review the communication to ensure language is welcoming and consistent with the values of the communities you hope to include.

Communication should also include any benefits the students will gain from their participation. Beyond leadership opportunities for older students, consider partnering with local businesses to provide small gift cards and/or snacks during the session. When appropriate, include the procedures that will be followed to ensure the health and safety of the student participants. Assure students that they do not have to answer every question and identify a process for students to gracefully excuse themselves if they feel uncomfortable.

Step 5. Train the Champions

The day of or the day prior to the event is the optimal time to bring together the adults who will be serving as champions or assisting in any manner. Utilize the *Voice Circle Facilitation* slide deck as it will walk the adults through the entire process and provide the why through research and case studies. Intentionally addressing the importance of confidentiality will be crucial. All names will be left off the recording documents unless it is something that needs to be communicated based on school district protocol and mandatory reporting laws.

During the gathering, provide a review of implicit bias and adequate time for champions to understand what implicit bias is, how their own implicit bias might show up in these spaces, and ways to combat their biases during the circle. See Implicit Bias section below for more resources.

Method for Capturing Responses

Having a method for capturing the responses is paramount. This honors the participants thoughts, points for clarification, and ah-ha's. While some champions may prefer to write the responses at their tables, a graphic organizer with the questions pre-populated, along with a script to follow is best practice for all perceptual data collection. This type of documentation aids in consistency across champions. A planning team member can be assigned the task of preparing the document, which is then copied and renamed with each champion name or table number. These can be reused and repopulated with new champions, table numbers, and questions at future sessions. Below is an example that can be modified.

Create and review a graphic organizer for each champion to record student responses. The form should include each question, along with probing questions that can be asked if the students need additional context and a space for the champion to type or write what they hear.

Questions	Student Responses (please separate responses by leaving a space between them)

Create a "Sample" Champion Script

Thank you for taking part in our Student Circle today! My name is _____. Can each of you please tell me your name and how long you have attended _____Elementary School? (Give time for each student to be introduced and share.)

Today we will have one hour to simply talk to each other and answer interesting questions. There is not a certain correct answer anyone is looking for. Whatever you say in response to the question is 100% correct! We are here to listen to each of you about your time as a student at _____ Elementary School. The adults are here to learn how to make it the best it can be from YOU and for you and all students that attend our school now and in the future.

Today I will be recording what you say in a document, but I won't write down any of your names. This gathering is considered confidential. Confidential means I won't tell anyone who said what unless someone needs help. We are asking all our adults AND students to

honor the conversations and privacy of others by not sharing the responses and stories of others outside this room. We want this to be a safe space where all of you feel comfortable to share your truth.

Each of you will be given an opportunity to respond to ___ number of questions. I will ask a question and each of you will have a chance to share. The paper on the table and the crayons and markers are for you to draw or write to help you think or write down something you want to be sure to share. If you like to doodle while you listen and talk, you can use the paper. If at any time you feel uncomfortable responding to a question, simply say, "pass."

Before we start, let's do something called an icebreaker. I will start by answering a fun and interesting question that will help us learn something about each other. Then, each of you can answer the same question. I am not recording any of these answers. This is for fun! (Select a question from the stack or let the students select one for the adult to answer first. If time allows, have the group answer another question.)

There is only one more thing we need to do. I want to share some group agreements for our discussion today...agreements like you have in your classrooms, only these are only for the next 60–90 minutes, and they are for all of us at this table, including me! (Read the 2-sided tent card in the center of the table to the students and ask if they have any questions about the agreements.)

It is finally time to begin! Do you have questions about the process? Here we go! Question #1.

The Impact of Implicit Bias on the Collection of Evidence

Implicit bias describes when we have attitudes toward people or associate stereotypes with them without our conscious knowledge (Perception Institute). Implicit bias works as a shortcut for our brain to make quick decisions based on the information we receive in our daily lives and our society. Personal preferences for one group of people over another typically aligns with the dominant culture's preferences, i.e., what we most commonly see portrayed as "good" and "bad," regardless of which group we personally belong to.

Also known as unconscious or hidden bias, implicit biases are negative associations that people unknowingly hold. They are expressed automatically, without conscious awareness. Many studies have indicated that implicit biases affect individuals' attitudes and actions, thus creating real-world implications, even though individuals may not even be aware that those biases exist within themselves. Notably, implicit biases have been shown to trump individuals' stated commitments to equality and fairness, thereby producing behavior that diverges from the explicit attitudes that many people profess (Staats, 2013). The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is often used to measure implicit biases regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, and other topics.

Understanding our own implicit biases toward different student groups must be attended to throughout every step of the process with the collection of perceptual data. From the

development of questions to the recording of data, every aspect will be impacted without a deep understanding of the role implicit bias plays.

Each individual participating in the facilitation of a voice circle to gather perceptual data must reflect on and intentionally address the implicit biases they bring to the table. Implicit bias impacts which student voices we unconsciously validate or dismiss. A failure to acknowledge implicit bias can lead individuals and the team to potentially come to the wrong conclusion, develop the wrong action steps, and walk away with assumptions and presumptions that support personal biases rather than the true data. It will have been a true waste of time for those participating and will undermine the development of trusting relationships.

The following action steps, while not comprehensive, can help the team better understand their implicit biases and create student voice circles that do not inadvertently create harm to historically marginalized groups of students.

1. Allow team members to individually assess their own biases with the Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Project Implicit), which measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., black people, gay people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy). The IAT is meant to help raise awareness and encourage self-reflection. When using with a team, it is important to keep the following in mind:

    - Participation should not be mandatory, nor should the individual results be shared publicly. It is meant for self-reflection.
    - The IAT should not be used for diagnostic purposes. IAT results can change depending on recent thoughts, experiences, and deliberate strategies used to influence the results.
    - People may not like their results and being confronted with the results may cause defensiveness or negative emotions. Ensure the team has time to understand the concept of implicit bias prior to taking the test.

2. Collaborate with your school, district, or regional equity teams and partners to write the voice circle questions, review communication materials, and analyze answers from the student voice circles. Questions written with the best intentions may inadvertently have negative impacts on vulnerable students. Our implicit biases may impact how we interpret and act on student responses. Partnering with organizations who specialize in equity and diversity brings in an intentional lens that teams may miss on their own.

3. Check for understanding of student responses in real time by allowing time for group or table reflections. After a question is asked and students have responded, have the facilitator summarize what they heard and ask the students if anything was missed or misrepresented.

During Voice Circles (Steps 6–8)

Step 6. Welcome the Audience

Creating a welcoming environment is critically important for any circle and for any audience. However, student circles offer a different dynamic that needs to be attended to. Reversing the roles will be new to students as they assume the teaching position. For some students, this may be the first time they have assumed this role and will need a table host who is a true champion, someone who genuinely wants to create the environment for student voices to surface and serves as a true advocate or champion.

- Welcome and thank the students or guests. Consider name tags for all, including adults. Have music playing. Set up the environment and experience to be comfortable, safe, and inviting.

- Ensure confidentiality to your guests about what they share (unless there is a health or safety concern).

- Consider providing beverages and a snack.

The Facilitator for the circle will welcome all and begin with introductions and review group agreements. All guests will be asked to take some time at the end of the circle to reflect on 1–2 questions to inform future voice circles. Have questions on chart paper and provide post-it notes or design this step on a page as an exit survey. Let your guests know at least one (1) action item will be identified from this circle.

Begin the circle with an icebreaker to get everyone talking at the tables. The champion should go first with responding to the question.

Step 7. Circle Time!

Begin the circle, reiterating that the adult will be recording responses, not names. The adult will be an active listener and check for understanding by asking clarifying questions. Frame this as, the educator becomes the learner, and the learner becomes the teacher.

Champions (Table Hosts) should:

- Act and react as a true Champion, someone who serves as an advocate for a person or cause.

- Actively listen and capture responses on the document provided in hard copy or online.

- Follow the expectation for questioning in the moment as well as Interview Behavior. This document is found in the "Resources" section under "Templates and Handouts."

- Monitor patterns of student participation and consider starting with a different guest for each question.

- Record responses on the document or form provided by the planning team. Leave off the names of the guests or anyone the participants identify by name (unless it is a positive).

The Facilitator should continue to circulate during the circle to monitor the process and time.

Step 8. Conclusion of Voice Circle

After the last question is posed and responses are recorded, the champions should have each guest use the post-it notes at the table to individually respond to the 1–3 reflection questions posted on chart paper near the exit.

Examples of powerful questions for students:

- "If we were to hold another circle, what topic would you like to discuss?" (a simple question that provides incredible insight).

- How did it feel to participate in the circle?

- If there was one item that could be addressed from our meeting today, what would you choose?

Guests can expect to be made aware of the item(s) and the proposed steps that will be addressed. They will continue to play a key role in informing the circle team on progress and could be brought back together to partner with the team in the development and implementation of the action steps.

After students/scholars are dismissed, bring the champions together with the facilitator and use the "Team Debrief" process to guide the discussion. This is a critically important piece and cannot be delayed or skipped.

After Voice Circles (Steps 9–10)

Step 9. Champion Team Debrief

After guests have exited, champions will use notecards provided to write a personal thank you to each of their guests at the event. Thank you notes can also be written for staff, community, and families. Once all champions have completed this task, they will meet with the Facilitator immediately to debrief and determine the next steps. It is critical to prioritize this debrief immediately after the voice circle.

Who should attend the debrief?

Facilitator, champions, building administrators, and school counselor. Facilitator leads with the "Voice Circle Debrief" document found at www.systems4support.com Invite the building administrator if he or she was not present for the session. Invite a school counselor if the counselor was not a champion.

When should the debrief take place?

Immediately following the circle once guests have departed. All champions need to be present for the entire debrief. The reason for the debrief taking place immediately following the circle is due to the need for the event specific details to be recalled or health and/or safety concerns brought forward to be acted on immediately.

Why is the debrief needed?

The debrief serves several purposes. It is a space for collecting materials and responding to debrief questions. Additionally, it is an opportunity for the adults to gather and reflect on what they just experienced. For many, the experience is not what they would have expected. Adults may need to discuss what they heard and share their feelings about it. If the facilitator is not also serving as the building administrator, the facilitator needs to remain connected with the building administrator to ensure ideas are embedded in future decision making. Many administrators have a well-intentioned desire to "fix" everything on their own right away but doing so robs the students and/or staff from participating in the resolution. If circle participants are not allowed to be involved in the resolution, it can serve as an additional barrier to sustainable success with school improvement items. Reassuring the champions that what was identified is systemic in nature is important. It is not a matter of shame or blame. It is a matter of acting on what was learned and communicating that action to the guests, so they see the value of their participation. Even better would be to include the guests in the action planning and monitoring process.

A Note on Confidentiality

Students or participants were asked to honor the stories of others. It is just as important, if not more important, that the team honors the guests and does not share with other adults outside the team, unless it is a specific debrief process with a team or a staff member. There will be a time and place to debrief the circle. Reminding staff members that staff member names, unless a compliment, are not recorded is important.

Step 10. Determine Next Steps

Identify next steps for sharing compiled and confidential responses (names removed from any narrative). Will this process be used as a staff development piece? Will you bring back the same students or a portion of them to take it one step further and allow them to identify an action step through an action research protocol? The final step could be a presentation to staff on the findings. Students could speak to the process, evidence, and action step(s) they will take. Students could also share with staff what they need from the system.

Moving from Analysis to Action

You have arrived! You held a voice circle, and you have a glorious collection of improvement ideas in your hands. What will you do with it? Many team members report that in the moment it was invigorating to hear the stories and to capture them and that taking part in the debrief with colleagues was a reflective experience, one that was in the very least revealing. It might have

caused the team to immediately question policies, procedures, relationships, systems, etc. It might have even brought up emotions running the gamut.

After walking away from the debrief, there are only two options. You can either move forward or do nothing which is the same as moving backward. The data you have just collected includes ideas, reflections, and wonderings for relevant, sustainable, and meaningful ACTION. Hopefully after investing in the time and effort to conduct a circle you realize that moving forward is the only option.

Consider the following questions.

- What message will it send if there is no communication with the participants after a listening session?

- What message will it send to the participants if nothing changes after a listening session?

- What message will it send if the collection of improvement ideas isn't shared in a manner where a greater audience can benefit or a greater good can take place?

Now, reflect on your own experiences as you read the following questions.

- How often have you taken a survey and not received the results?

- How often have you been a member of a team but didn't feel like it resulted in any measurable change and that it could even be considered a waste of time?

A lot of us have experience with being asked for our opinion, thoughts, and ideas and not feeling as if they were valued. This is exactly what we do not want to happen following a voice circle.

Moving Forward with Staff Members
If you will be engaging your staff members in the analysis, consider the following process. You will want to allow for at least 45–60 minutes. It is highly likely you will need an additional session. If there are time constraints, simply break the process into 30–minute chunks.

Moving Forward with Students, Families, and Community
If you will be reconvening your students, families, or community members to take part in the analysis, you will want to consider the following process with some minor shifts to it. You will want to allow for additional time and have, at the very least, your planning team with you to station themselves at tables or in breakout rooms for guidance on the process.

Recommendations for Next Steps
After the voice circles have been completed, it is necessary to meet with the team to identify how the students' voices will be acted upon. Ideally this session will be scheduled after the team members have had time to process and reflect on the activity. Outlined below is a process the team can use to move the information you learned into creating change.

Why and Purpose

Share the "why" for holding the session. If you have data from a report or survey, provide it to the group. Share the "purpose" for today's meeting. Identify at least one action item from the listening session and share that action item and ongoing progress with the listening session's participants so they are aware of the value placed on their feedback.

Research

Provide the group with the handout for "[Student Voice and Visible Learning](#)." Draw attention to the correlation between student voice and feedback to academics and engagement.

Confidentiality

Address the requirement of confidentiality regarding the responses. Students should not ever hear, "We read your responses and I think…" Explain that all student response pages will be turned in at the end of the session to protect and honor confidentiality.

Responses that Resonate

Provide time for the group to read the responses in silence. Instruct individuals to use highlighters to mark all responses that resonate with them. They should be prepared to select and share 1–2 responses that resonate the most. Record the "Resonating Responses" on chart paper. Place a check mark next to responses mentioned more than once.

Frequency

Have the group review all responses again, only this time it will be for "frequency." They can highlight, number, or circle similar comments for the purpose of counting the most frequent types of responses. When individuals finish the review, have them share their top 2–3 frequent responses with a table group or partner. Each duo, triad, breakout room, or table will then agree on the top 3 to share with the large group. The Facilitator records the most frequent responses on chart paper labeled "Frequent Responses."

Themes

Have the small groups or breakout rooms review the charts labeled "Responses that Resonate" and "Frequent Responses." Give groups time to identify themes for what they are seeing on the chart paper. Share themes and place on chart paper labeled "themes."

Worthy Issue

Have the group identify a "worthy" issue for action planning after viewing all three charts. Share the following criteria for how to identify a worthy issue for action (Lipton & Wellman, 2012).

- Issue appears to be pervasive (all or most grade levels).

- Issue was mentioned frequently.

- Addressing the issue could positively impact a large number of students.

Root Cause Analysis

Once you identify the issue for action, consider using the ["Five Why" protocol](#) to determine root cause if you are unsure of the cause and how to proceed. Divide the group into pairs and instruct each pair to place the issue or problem at the top of the template and work through the protocol until they identify something they can control. Bring the group back together to hear the different items identified as a root cause. Select 1–2 for action.

Action and Communicate

Use chart paper to list a SMARTIE goal and steps to be transferred to the action plan template. Consider using [this action plan template](#).

Integrating Student Voice into Continuous Cycles of Improvement

Creating systemic change requires our education system to embark on continuous cycles of improvement. That is, we must first understand the existing barriers that hinder students from achieving, identify solutions or change ideas, create an actionable plan to implement the changes, and then circle back to assess whether the changes are making the differences we seek and whether they have caused any additional harm to students. Student voice can play a critical role in identifying solutions and change ideas based on the lived experience of those the system impacts most.

While holding your first student voice circle starts the journey of incorporating student voice into decision-making processes, it is also necessary to continue these opportunities for students to provide additional insights into how the changes impact them throughout the year and into the future. What works for one cohort of students may need adjusting to fit the context of future students.

While this is not the only strategy or tool in the toolbox to positively impact school improvement efforts, it is one that encourages all of us to begin the process of listening to understand. Our additions, modifications, and deletions to our school improvement plans will be based on new knowledge and not our best guess. Truly partnering with our students, families, community, and staff holds one of the crucial keys to transformation. Those who work or live closest to the data we are examining must be included in the conversation and the planning.

There are many strategies out there that can and will assist a team of educators or a school system with uncovering the "why." One of the easiest strategies doesn't require a high-powered expensive consultant or a huge budget. It requires deep listening and relationships and dialogue with the people and communities we serve. It is holding authentic conversations, being vulnerable, and partnering with those who have not had a seat at the table. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie puts it perfectly. "*The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.*"

Uncovering the systemic barriers to sustainable and successful school improvement can be as easy and as challenging as an authentic question. Voice matters.

Resources

For additional information and access to templates, materials, and resources, visit the [Systems4Support website](#).

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Websites

Association of Washington Student Leaders: The Association of Washington Student Leaders (AWSL) empowers students to lead and make positive change within their schools, communities, and themselves. AWSL designs and provides fun, hands-on programs for all ages that builds school community, promotes students as leaders and teaches social responsibility for all ages. https://awsleaders.org/

Five Why Protocol: Use this tool to peel away the layers of symptoms which can lead to the root cause of a problem. https://www.isixsigma.com/tools-templates/cause-effect/determine-root-cause-5-whys/

National Equity Project: The National Equity Project supports leaders to transform their systems into equitable, resilient, and liberating environments. https://www.nationalequityproject.org/

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction: OSPI offers many resources for learning more about student voice, data, action planning, etc. https://www.k12.wa.us/

Perception Institute: Site for research on implicit bias. https://perception.org/research/implicit-bias/

Project Implicit: The mission of Project Implicit is to educate the public about bias and to provide a "virtual laboratory" for collecting data on the internet. Project Implicit scientists produce high-impact research that forms the basis of our scientific knowledge about bias and disparities. https://www.projectimplicit.net/ Link to portal https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/

Project READY: Reimagining Equity & Access for Diverse Youth. This is a free online professional development curriculum. Module 19: Student voice & agency. Retrieved from http://ready.web.unc.edu/section-2-transforming-practice/module-19/

Quaglia Institute: Working in partnership with schools, Quaglia Institute provides voice and leadership training for students and staff tailored to the needs and goals of school districts. They offer almost forty years of experience leading voice and aspirations work. https://quagliainstitute.org/

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The World Café: Learn more about the World Café methodology as it is simple, effective, and has a flexible format for hosting large group dialogue. http://www.theworldcafe.com/

Youth-led Participatory Action Research: Interested in having students participate in their own action research? This site has everything you need to know to lead it with examples of the power of youth-led participatory action research. http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/

Videos

Christian Paige, "Trees" (3:06): Christian Paige is an Emmy nominated poet, passionate keynote speaker, and an equity consultant who ignites scholars and leaders to use their voices powerfully. He uses his artistic expression to empower individuals and communities. Be inspired by this sample of his work. https://youtu.be/_5N8ylPCN5Q

Future Project HS Video: This clip may be short, but it is powerful! Watch and listen to students speaking about their school experiences and imagining what a future school should look like if it is based on student needs. https://vimeo.com/155339834

Quaglia Institute (4:30): The why for focusing on student voice is captured beautifully in this short clip. https://youtu.be/gsClwQXUXAI

The Danger of the Single Story (18:33): Novelist Chimamanda Adichie tells the story of how she found her authentic cultural voice. She warns that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?utm_campaign=tedspread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare

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About the Author

Dr. Kathryn Page was born and raised in Washington and has served as a teacher, school principal, and as an administrator serving in various roles at the district office. Her career led her to working as a contractor for Washington's Office of System and School Improvement (OSSI) assisting school districts with continuous improvement efforts. Kathryn's experience, training, and service as a supervisor for principal interns at the university level, and as mentor for new administrators through the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP), has only reinforced her belief in the critically important role of a building administrator on both the climate and culture of a school community.

Dr. Page received her BA from Central Washington University in Special Education and Elementary Education and completed her MA at Whitworth University in Educational Administration. Her doctoral work in Educational Leadership brought her to Gonzaga University where she examined the evidence-based strategies to surface the barriers to school improvement efforts.

Kathryn has been a presenter on various topics for OSSI, Educational Service Districts, school districts, and at the university level. In 2019 and 2022 she was a presenter for the Annual Washington State Becca Conference on strategies to address chronic absenteeism and surface barriers to continuous improvement efforts. This guide represents 25 + years of her experience as a teacher and as an administrator engaging those who have not had a voice in the educational system. She continues this work fueled by an unwavering belief that...
Voice matters.