Power of Student Voice

By Andy Plemmons

What does it mean to empower the voices of members of our library community? The library program does not belong to one person, and it is up to us as school librarians to look for ways to empower each voice in our school. By offering a variety of experiences and by taking risks to try new and innovative practices, we are more likely to find opportunities for students who may not have found their voice yet.

Student Voice in the Collection

When students come into the library to search for something to read, they should be able to find themselves and their interests. I, of course, have an obligation to diversify the collection and introduce readers to different perspectives and topics, but readers should also be able to find their own interests and passions. I cannot assume that I know what interests kids. Therefore, I’ve found value in turning the process of developing the collection over to students. Each year, I reserve a portion of our library budget for students. This student book budget project is led by third through fifth graders who are selected by an application process. Basically, if you apply to be in the group and have a genuine interest, you are included.

I offer advice, but the decisions belong to them. Using Google Forms, the book budget team develops a reading interest survey that is emailed to all third through fifth graders. For our younger students, the team individually surveys students in classrooms, at lunch, and at recess. All data populates a Google spreadsheet.

Next, the team analyzes the results to determine the top interests and requests of students. They set purchasing goals based on this data and decide how much money to allot to each category. On behalf of the team, I contact vendors and ask them to meet with the group and show books that match the goals. Jim Boon of Capstone, Grett Hechenbleikner of Gumdrop Books, and Will Walton of Avid Bookshop all come on separate days to talk directly with the team. During this time, students don’t worry about money but instead develop wish lists of books that match their goals.

The most challenging part of the project comes when the team has to narrow wish lists down to those books they can purchase within their budget. The team spends time taking a stand for students they had conversations with during the survey process to ensure requested books stay on the list. They also consider holes in the collection and demand for certain categories of books.

Finally, the books are ordered. As we await delivery, the team plans how to market the books through displays, commercials, posters, or special announcements. On delivery day, the team unpacks the books, checks the order against the packing slip, and starts putting their marketing plan into action.

I have implemented this project for over five years and each year it incorporates more voices in our school. This effort involves far more than keeping a list of student requests. It brings students into the entire process of collection development, and the books
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the team purchases are always among the most circulated books because they represent the interests, stories, and voices of the members of the library community.

**Grade Level Voice beyond Walls**

When students know that their voice matters and will reach beyond the classroom to an audience that listens, their motivation to create a project that represents their best work increases. For three years, our second-grade teachers have collaborated with me on a project known as the Barrow Peace Prize. The project began as a research project in which students wrote about a historical figure and designed a postage stamp representing that person. Out of a desire for more authenticity in the project, the Barrow Peace Prize was created.

Through a Google Hangout, I introduce the Nobel Peace Prize to all five second-grade classes simultaneously. The classes then collaborate on a list of criteria essential to winning the prize. Each class comes to the library for a series of research sessions to find facts about one of six people from history. The people are chosen based on second-grade standards and social studies character traits. Facts gathered from multiple online databases, ebooks, and print books are used to craft a persuasive essay about why each person deserves to win our school’s Barrow Peace Prize.

In the art classroom, students create an image that represents their person. This image could be a sketch or painting of the actual person or something that symbolizes the person. Students bring their finished piece of art and persuasive writing back to the library for small group recording sessions.

Using Flipgrid, students take a picture of their image and record themselves reading their essay. These videos are organized into grids by person and pulled together on a Smore page so that the entire grade level’s work can be easily shared. I add a Google Form for viewers to vote on who they think should win the award. This page is shared with our school, our families, and with the world through my blog and other social media tools. At the conclusion of the project, we Skype with the Flipgrid team in Minnesota to announce the winner of the Barrow Peace Prize as well as recognize the work of many individual students.

There are many elements of this project that stand out in relation to student voice. There are opportunities for every student to shine in some aspect of the project whether it’s through art, public speaking, writing, research, or persuasive technique. I love that the voices of an entire grade level are united. In our celebration, I often see students forgetting about who actually wins the prize and focusing more on supporting one another as individual students are recognized for their contributions. The Flipgrid team always stresses to students how their work is making an impact by sharing how many views and likes the students have received as a grade level. They remind students that even as an elementary student, their voices matter.

**The Individual Voice**

It is, of course, also important for us to always be looking for opportunities to empower individual voices within our schools, and we can never know when or where these opportunities will arise. One of our teachers, hoping to accomplish some project-based learning, asked me to work with her students to explore their interests. What we quickly realized was that many of her students had no idea what their interests really were. Rather than jumping into projects, we spent time looking through books and magazines for topics of interest.

Carlos, a student in her class, read about a bracelet beading craft. His excitement about the project led his friend Carlena to also read up on the craft. After school that day, I got an email from Carlos asking me to send him a picture of the magazine article.

At that moment, I knew we had an opportunity to honor an individual student’s voice and interests. I sent him the picture and also bought all the supplies needed to make the bracelet. The next day I invited both Carlos and Carlena to come to the library to work on the craft. They both came, read the directions, and came every day for a week to work on their own secret project.
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I documented the process through pictures and shared them on social media. Gretchen Thomas, a collaborative partner at the University of Georgia, saw my tweets and got her students involved in making the bracelets too. They, in turn, shared tweets with us, and I shared those pictures with Carlos and Carlena. They couldn’t believe that students in college were creating the same thing that they were all because of sharing through social media.

When the duo’s bracelets were done, I asked them if they would lead a makerspace activity to teach others how to make the bracelets, and they excitedly agreed. They took their newly discovered interest and passed on their learning. And they didn’t stop with the makerspace session. Sherry Gick, a librarian in Indiana, had a class who Skyped with Carlos and Carlena to learn about making the bracelets. Now Carlos and Carlena’s voices had moved beyond the walls of our school to other states.

This kind of opportunity would not have happened if we had not taken time to explore. I think we often rush into standards and specific projects without giving students time to tinker and figure out exactly what they like. We need to look for opportunities and create the space for students to find their voice. Social media networks can amplify their work and demonstrate that their voices can be used to teach others new ideas.

Moving Forward

As we think about how we can empower student voices in our libraries, I think it’s important to remember that there’s not one right way. The more opportunities we offer students to engage in our library programs, the more likely we will find ways to amplify the voices of entire school communities, grade levels, small groups, and even individual students. One voice is not more important than another, so we must always be mindful of creating opportunities for all members of our library community. Our students are eager to contribute. We just need to create the opportunities and the spaces for their voices to be heard.

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Got Voice?

Pam Harland’s seven-part workshop on creating your learning commons is chockfull of great ideas to help your students find their voices and gain confidence as experts. Follow the QR code to learn more about tapping into your students’ passions and skills to empower and engage.