AN EQUITY TOOLKIT FOR INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS: CENTERING YOUTH VOICE IN SCHOOL CHANGE

Created by:
Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center

September, 2017

Acknowledgements

About the Centers

Great Lakes Equity Center (Center) is an educational research and service center located in Indiana University's School of Education at IUPUI. The Center engages in equity-focused technical assistance and related research with educational and community agencies focused on systemic improvements to serve all learners with particular focus on educational access, participation and outcomes for those who have been historically marginalized. Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center is a project of the Center and provides technical assistance related to educational equity based on student race, national origin, sex, and religion at no cost to public educational agencies throughout its 13-state region in the Midwest and Plains.

Introduction

This equity toolkit is designed as an opportunity for school stakeholders to gauge, reflect on, and plan for meaningful youth participation in advancing more equitable and inclusive schools. Although this toolkit is designed for collaborative use with school adults and youth, it can be modified for use at the classroom-level, solely with youth, or solely with adults. In essence, this tool is designed to meet school stakeholders where they are and provide them with opportunities for reflection and planning in order to advance equity at the school, grade-level, or classroom level. This toolkit centers the notion of "student voice" as a robust equity tool in the work to create more inclusive schools. Student voice can mean many things, but for the purpose of this took, we use Mitra and Gross's (2009) student voice framework, which they refer to as the "Pyramid of Student Voice," to operationalize student voice as an equity tool in schools (see Figure 1).
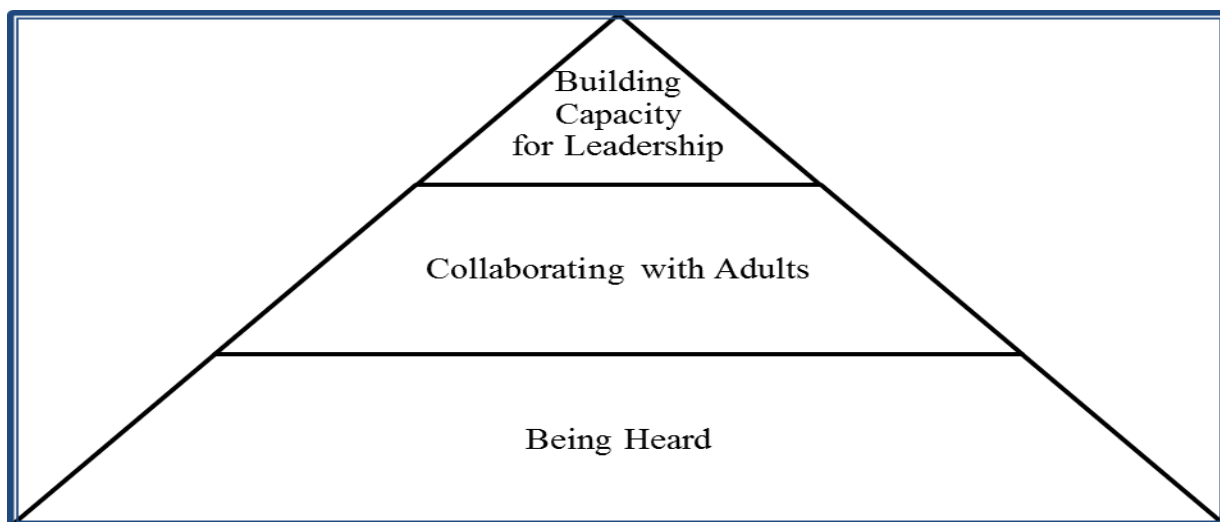

Figure 1 (Mitra & Gross, 2009, p. 523)

Framework for Centering Student Voice in Inclusive Schools

This equity toolkit draws on Mitra and Gross's framework to think not only about student voice development but also how schools structure equitable opportunities for historically marginalized youth (e.g., youth with disabilities, students of color, students with disciplinary records, non-Christian) to develop voice while exploring and acting on educational inequities that impact their own educational experiences.

Mitra and Gross's (2009) framework represents student voice as it develops within a school setting. As the pyramid ascends, student civic engagement concurrently develops alongside skill sets to actively participate in democracies beyond school. The foundational tier, "being heard" refers to school adults acknowledging that youth have unique and important perspectives (Mitra & Gross, 2009) that have the capacity to push adult conversations and understandings beyond comfortable and palatable zones. Indeed, moving past these adult comfort zones can push school change into innovative territories. The next tier of the student voice, "collaborating with adults," involves students and staff working together to improve their school through action. The final, and smallest tier, "building capacity for leadership," youth not only partner with adults but are provided with opportunities for civic development. In other words, students develop the capacities needed to take action as leaders in their schools, communities, and democratic societies. Systematically sharing leadership with youth also opens up opportunities to re-engage disenfranchised youth (Mitra & Gross, 2009).

Though Mitra and Gross (2009) highlight the increased civic development that transpires as one ascends the student voice framework, we would like to highlight that this framework also affords schools a robust way to increase equity and inclusion by centering the experiences of historically marginalized youth (see Figure 2).
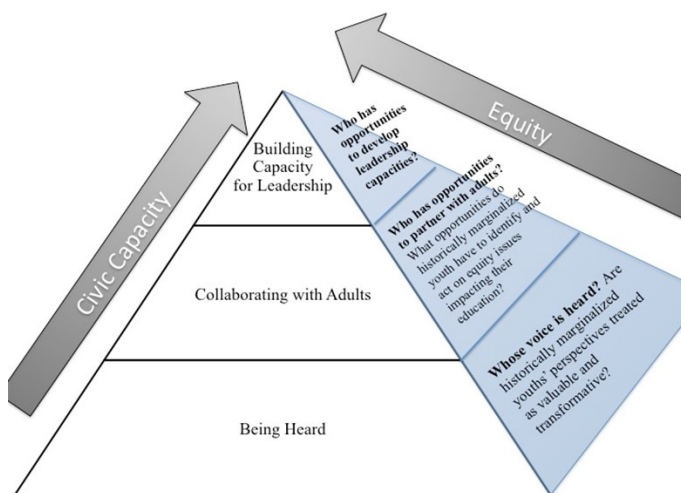

Figure 2 adapted from Mitra and Gross (2009, p. 523)

How to Use This Tool

We developed this toolkit to be used flexibly by school stakeholders committed to creating equitable and inclusive schools *with* youth. Therefore, youth may or may not be involved in using this toolkit.

The need for including student voice in inclusive education reform efforts is a critical step toward developing more equitable schools. Though youth are at the center of all school reform efforts, they are seldom treated as partners in these efforts. Without youth, school reform efforts are limited to adults' understandings of what counts as equity, which can continue to perpetuate some of the most marginalized youth. This tool draws on student voice as a robust tool in school reform, with the understanding that youth contributions and partnerships can deeply impact the equity and inclusive visions of educational systems.

This tool can be used as an opportunity collaboratively to problem solve, identify priorities, and formulate action plans. The tool maintains focus of three principles regarding student voice: youth offer valuable perspectives and capacities that can advance this work in innovative ways, adult-centered notions may not address the equity issues impacting youths' educational experiences, and that opportunities to develop civic engagement have historically been scarce for historically marginalized youth.

The following underlying principles ground the tool:
- Youth have unique and valuable perspectives and capacities
- Adult-centered notions of equity may have major equity gaps
- Opportunities for youth to develop leadership capacity is an equity issue

In the first part of the toolkit (pp. 4-6) educators will see transforming descriptors of youth representation in their school. Adults (possibly working in partnership with youth) are able to identify where they see these indicators in their school, who is represented in each descriptor, and which indicators might become equity priorities within the school. There are blank spaces were teams are able to add it their own descriptors of youth voice observed in their school. The second step of the toolkit (pp. 7-8) is an optional tool for youth to participate in mapping student voice issues in their school. This is a flexible tool that youth can you individually, in pairs, or in small groups to inform the larger conversation. The final step of the toolkit (pp. 9) allows adults and youth to begin the action plan of prioritizing equity issues within their school and identifying who is represented in various equity issues. The team is able to use this step in the tool for goal setting.

Centering Student Voice in Inclusive Schools

Being Heard

Transforming Descriptors	Where do adults/ youth see evidence of this descriptor (school wide, in certain classrooms, in certain subjects)?	Who is represented and not represented in this practice?	Which of these descriptors are equity priorities (rate as low, moderate, or high priority area)?
Students have opportunities to discuss how they experience school in class or through school-wide initiatives.			
Students have regular opportunities to engage in facilitated discussions where they can express various viewpoints even if they are counter to dominant perspectives.			
Students have a system for providing feedback to school leaders regarding school issues, suggestions, and desires.			
Students have multiple means of expressing their perspectives regarding school issues (e.g., through essays, art, dialogue, technology).			
[Add your own descriptor]:			

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Collaborating with Adults

Transforming Descriptors	Where do adults/ youth see evidence of this descriptor (school wide, in certain classrooms, in certain subjects)?	Who is represented and not represented in this practice?	Which of these descriptors are equity priorities (rate as low, moderate, or high priority area)?
Students have opportunities to identify equity issues impacting their educational experiences without adult censorship.			
Students have opportunities to work with adults to learn more about the issues they identify.			
Adults consider all of the student-identified issues and work with youth to prioritize which should be included in school reform efforts.			
Student-collected data is used as a data set in school improvement efforts.			
[Add your own descriptor]:			
[Add your own descriptor]:			

Centering Student Voice in Inclusive Schools

Building Capacity for Leadership

Transforming Descriptors	Where do adults/youth see evidence of this descriptor (school wide, in certain classrooms, in certain subjects)?	Who is represented and not represented in this practice?	Which of these descriptors are equity priorities (rate as low, moderate, or high priority area)?
Students are actively involved in school improvement meetings.			
Adult facilitators support youth in developing the capacities to address the issues they identify (e.g., research methods, dissemination strategies).			
Historically marginalized youth have opportunities to re-engage in their education through leadership and civic engagement rather than over-relying on academic interventions.			
[Add your own descriptor]:			
[Add your own descriptor]:			

Mapping Youth Voice at School

Recommended tools: Paper copies of the school map, color-coding dot labels in assorted colors, pens/pencils

Youth can create individual maps, work in pairs (social peer groups), or in small groups to map their school. The following coding system can be used to map student voice in your school, but you can also add your own categories:

🔴	Where do I feel that school adults care about my ideas and opinions?
🟣	Where do I feel like I can express my opinion even if it is different from adults' opinion?
🟢	Which students are most respected or listened to in different parts of the school? You can label the dots with different student groups by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, ability differences, sex, or income. Ex: LGBTQ might be placed on a sticker in Ms. Smith's class because of a LGBTQ after school club.
🟡	Add your own category. For example, are there places in school where some students are really listened to and others are not?

Whose Voice Counts and Where?

Look at your map and use it to discuss student voice in your school.

- Were there similarities in your orange and pink dots? What happens in these places that make you feel that your voice matters?

What Do School Adults Need to Know?

Brainstorm a hypothesis about student voice in your school.
What do you think school adults need to know about student voice in your school?

- Do students (most, some, few) have opportunities to learn the skills to be a leader in their schools or community?
- Do adults (most, few some) seek out student ideas?
- Do adults (most, few some) value student ideas and act on them in class or in the school?
- Where do some of these student voice opportunities already exist in the school?

Moving Forward Together

What did we learn about student voice in our school?

In what ways are youth and adult perspectives on current student voice opportunities in the school similar and different?	
What existing practices, policies, programs might be opportunities to build on or learn from?	
What equity concerns arose pertaining to who has opportunities to develop leadership (civic capacity)?	

Who needs to be involved in implementing the plan?

Whose voice is heard in the school and who has opportunities for developing leadership capacities? How can any inequities be remedied?	
Where is your school on the Framework for Centering Student Voice in Inclusive Schools (see Figure 1)?	

How can these concerns be addressed in moving-forward goals?

Identify one to two goals that would result in more equitable youth involvement in school change?	
Where is your school on the Framework for Centering Student Voice in Inclusive Schools (see Figure 1)?	
Who should be involved (adults and youth) and who should be responsible (adults)?	
What resources are available to support achieving these goals?	

Mitra, D. L., & Gross, S. J. (2009). Increasing student voice in high school reform: Building partnerships, improving outcomes. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *37*(4), 522-543.

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Recommended citation: Gonzalez, T., McCabe, K.M., & Castro, C.L.D. (2017). *Equity Tool: An Equity Toolkit For Inclusive Schools: Centering Youth Voice in School Change.* Indianapolis, IN: Great Lakes Equity Center.

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