

# The Physical Voice in ‘Student Voice’

## Empowering students’ physical voices through a public-speaking approach

### Introduction

The topic of student voice speaks of potential and possibility and of truly placing students at the centre of their education. In my experience, however, student voice is most often spoken about in the metaphorical sense, referring to representation. In this sense it implies a whole-school commitment to listening to the views and experiences of all students, as well as pedagogical approaches based on student choices and interests.

Talking with students about things that matter in school has a central place in writing about the practice of student voice (Fielding, 2004). According to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), children have the right to be heard in matters that affect their lives. Since its ratification, however, Article 12 has proven to be one of the most challenging articles to implement (Lansdown, 2011). To truly realise ‘student voice’, surely all students must be enabled and empowered to develop and strengthen their physical voice.

### Empowering students’ physical voices

Through my teaching and PhD studies, I’ve discovered that empowering the physical voices of all students is important and possible through a public-speaking approach. Nearly all teachers and parents (98.5%) who responded to my research survey said they have been called on to speak in public at some stage in their lives, which implies that public-speaking skills are necessary life skills. An initial negative experience of public speaking in childhood was cited by some respondents as a reason for their fear of public speaking into adulthood.



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**What is the role of children’s voices in ‘student voice’? This article explores the importance of empowering the physical voices of all children through a public-speaking approach to oral language development. If we are serious about realising the concept of student voice in our primary schools, we must enable and empower all students to speak up, speak out to the best of their abilities, and literally have their voice heard.**

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Public speaking is not often associated with primary school, yet it is engaged in every day. As one survey respondent noted: 'All areas of the curriculum require recall and recount of information, as well as explanation of work, therefore public speaking is easily integrated into all areas.' Across the world, primary school children regularly stand up in front of their peers to present, but the degree to which they are prepared for this is unclear.

Shafer (2010) writes that students as young as five years old are often required to speak in public without adequate training, and that some learn to connect public-speaking experiences with fear and anxiety. Choi (1998) writes that 'most often, students are scared and reluctant to present because they have neither had experience nor learned the rules' (p. 30). It is noteworthy that social phobias, such as fear of public speaking, develop and are most pronounced during early adolescence (10–14 years) (Field et al., 2003).

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*The definition of public speaking preferred by my study participants is from Merriam-Webster: 'the art of effective communication with an audience'.*

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## Primary school: a safe space to practise

Forget about the traditional view of public speaking as a formal activity that only society's most privileged and powerful engage in. The definition of public speaking preferred by my study participants is from Merriam-Webster: 'the art of effective communication with an audience'.

The good news is that we can support all our students to develop their speaking voice, communication skills, and confidence really effectively and relatively easily, in the safe, supportive environment of our classrooms, by providing explicit training in the skills and with regular opportunities for practice and constructive feedback. Public-speaking skills can be developed in a fun, interactive way, and once the skills are learned, many opportunities for practice arise organically across the school day.

## Benefits

Some of the benefits of a public-speaking approach are as follows:

- » All students can get periods of uninterrupted speech exploration and can progress at their own pace.
- » Students' sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and confidence develop as a result of engaging in meaningful mastery experiences.
- » Students benefit from hearing many presentations by their peers.
- » Topics can be taken from across the curriculum and personalised to appeal to students' interests.
- » Students learn strategies to manage nerves and self-regulate, experiencing how fears, once faced, can be overcome.

- » When students present on a topic, they understand it deeply and can explain how it relates to themselves and their community (Baker, 2008).

The more that children participate, the more effective their contributions, and the strengthening of their skills, confidence, and capacity for democratic participation will bring lifelong benefits (Lansdown, 2011). Having the experience of being truly listened to and heard empowers children to continue to express themselves.

Public speaking is a part of oral language that empowers children to 'develop their thinking, expression, reflection, critique and empathy and supports the development of self-efficacy, identity and full participation in society' (NCCA, 2019, p.6). Democracy can function only if young people learn to argue effectively (Andrews, 1994). If we are truly serious about and committed to realising the concept of student voice in our primary schools, we must enable and empower all students to speak up and out to the best of their abilities, and not just figuratively but literally have their voice heard.

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