Beyond Voice:
Agents of Democracy

When I applied for my first teaching job, students sat with staff on the interview panel.

At that school, students could negotiate how they wanted their marks to be distributed (provided it aligned with the curriculum) and they provided course feedback at midterm and final. And so was the story of an alternative secondary school teetering on the edge of the inner city doing everything we could to keep those kids in school. That was 1989.

Look around public school board meetings in Ontario today and you will see student representatives debating sophisticated issues and advocating for their peers. Even in kindergarten classes, teachers invite students to respond to their experiences by checking a smiley, neutral or sad face.

Thankfully student agency is becoming more common in our classrooms—but still not ubiquitous. How are students co-constructors and true partners of the schooling experience? How do students influence the direction of the learning, of the school and of their community? And most importantly, what are they learning when they are not authentically welcomed to the table? The Partnership dimension of the Learning Design Rubric and School Conditions Rubric speak to this point directly.

[1]Hart's Ladder (1992) also clarifies levels of student agency and their impact on students. He warns that trivializing student involvement can reduce them to decoration and tokenism and youth are smart enough to understand if they are being manipulated. When students understand the intention of the initiative, when it is truly voluntary, and know how the decisions will be made and why, their engagement is more genuine. Authentic student involvement occurs when decision making is truly shared with the young people. Adults shouldn't step out of the way here. Rather, they become activators, coaches, animators that help students channel their energies and realize their focus.
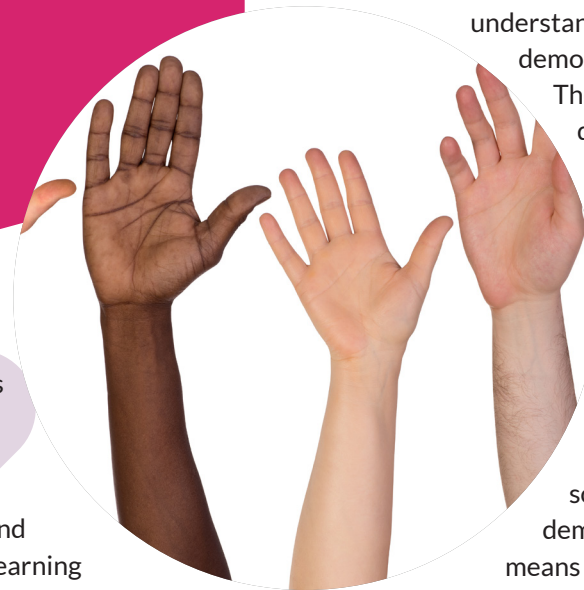
Here Hart stirs the pot: "Schools, as an integral part of the community, should be an obvious venue for fostering young people's understanding and experience of democratic participation… The practice of democratic principles, even in high schools, is typically limited to the election of class representatives to sit on school councils, serving only in an advisory or consulting capacity. To most school administrators, democracy in the schools means the collapse of rules and anarchy!" He continues: "Without such a direct focus on issues of authority, it is likely that children will experience simulated democracy in the classroom while the traditional structure of teacher authority and autocratic governance in schools remains intact."

As educators, we understand that greater student engagement will encourage student success. But how do we interpret our roles in preparing students to become thoughtful and contributing members of democratic society and how do we as educators shift our behaviors to foster that? In a world where democracies are increasingly strained, what are the implications if we don't?

Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation
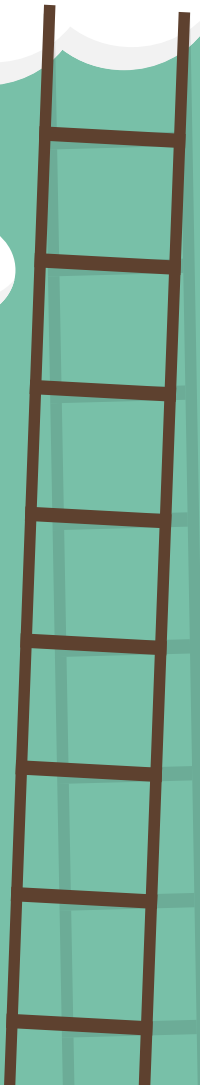
RUNG 8 - Youth initiated shared decisions with adults: Youth-led activities, in which decision making is shared between youth and adults working as equal partners.

RUNG 7 - Youth initiated and directed: Youth-led activities with little input from adults.

RUNG 6 - Adult initiated shared decisions with youth: Adult-led activities, in which decision making is shared with youth.

RUNG 5 - Consulted and informed: Adult-led activities, in which youth are consulted and informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of adult decisions.

RUNG 4 - Assigned, but informed: Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, decision-making process, and have a role.

RUNG 3 - Tokenism: Adult-led activities, in which youth may be consulted with minimal opportunities for feedback.

RUNG 2 - Decoration: Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, but have no input in how they are planned.

RUNG 1 - Manipulation: Adult-led activities, in which youth do as directed without understanding of the purpose for the activities.

[1] Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, as cited in www.freechild.orq/ladder.htm

Questions for Discussion:

- What are some of your memories of student involvement - where would you place them on Hart's ladder?

- What impact did that have on your growth?

- What are some ways your classroom/school currently facilitates experiences for student agency?

- What might be one way your students could be engaged at "rung 8"?

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For more information, contact:

Mag Gardner
mgardner@deep-learning.global

Max Drummy
mdrummy@deep-learning.global

Youth Voice and Engagement: The Rewards and the Challenges

Adapted from the work of Adam Fletcher

	The way young people are engaged (Rung on Hart's Ladder)	The Challenge	The Reward
NON-ENGAGEMENT	1. Adults manipulate youth	Youth forced to attend without regard to interest.	Experience of involving youth and rational for continuing activities.
	2. Adults use youth to decorate their activities	The presence of youth is treated as all that is necessary without reinforcing active involvement.	A tangible outcome demonstrating thinking about youth voice.
	3. Adults tokenize youth	Young people are used inconsequentially by adults to reinforce the perception that youth are involved.	Validates youth attendance without requiring the work to go beyond that.
PARTIAL ENGAGEMENT	4. Youth inform adults	Adults do not have to let youth impact their decisions.	Youth can impact adult-driven decisions or activities.
	5. Adults actively consult youth while they're involved	Youth only have the authority that adults grant them and are subject to adult approval.	Youth can substantially transform adults' opinions, ideas, and actions.
ENGAGEMENT	6. Youth are fully equal with adults while they're involved. This is a 50/50 split of authority, obligation, and commitment.	Lack of recognition of the specific developmental needs or representation opportunities for youth. Without these, youth lose interest and may become disengaged quickly.	Youth can experience full power and authority, as well as the experience of forming basic youth/adult partnerships.
	7. Young person-driven activities do not include adults in positions of authority; rather, they are there to support youth in passive roles.	Youth operate in a vacuous situation where the impact of their larger community isn't recognized by them. young person-driven activities may not be seen with the validity of co-led activities, either.	Developing complete ownership of their learning allows youth to drive the educational experience effectively. Youth experience the potential of their actions upon themselves, their peers, and their community
	8. Youth have full equity with adults. All are recognized for impact and ownership of the outcomes.	Requires conscious commitment by all participants to overcoming all barriers.	Creating structures to support differences can establish safe, supportive learning environments, ultimately recreating the climate and culture in communities.