

IDENTITY SAFE Classrooms

Grades
6-12

Pathways to Belonging and Learning

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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from
Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades 6-12.

Listening for Student Voices 3

Why Listening for Student Voices Matters

It is fitting to start our journey toward identity safety for secondary students by exploring ways to create space for recognizing and amplifying their voices in their classroom. As educators, we need to listen, listen, listen. As students develop their social identities and come to understand the multiple aspects of themselves, they also need the opportunity to express themselves and discover their uniqueness, both verbally and nonverbally. Educators can play an important role in enhancing this process.

Many pressures can impede student voice in the classroom. Required high school curriculum and the push toward meeting college entrance requirements put tremendous burdens on educators to “cover” content and can inadvertently influence them to suppress student voice. This pressure can interfere with taking the time for creating a safe space to hear, share, and draw from students’ ideas. In actuality, preparing students for college would logically involve helping them learn to express themselves, as this is a meaningful competency for navigating the complexities of college life on their own. In this chapter, we will explore ways to open up opportunities for students to find and express their voice, along with ways to assure them that we are listening deeply.

Listening for Student Voices is an *equitable practice* that asks educators to truly listen to every student. Educators have the role of monitoring classroom activity—what is said and not said—and drawing student voices out. Students develop confidence through opportunities to formulate and express feelings, beliefs, ideas, questions, theories, and arguments.

Listening for student voices is also important for another reason. We introduced Paul Gorski’s (2017) model for “equity literacy” in Chapter 1: The Introduction. Educators can detect bias when it manifests in classroom interactions and in curricular materials. For example, they notice who dominates and who is left out of conversations. They use these observations to reach out to students whose voices are not being heard and find ways to include them. They work to notice and dismantle biases or blind spots in curriculum, instruction, and classroom norms and routines that could be privileging some student voices over others.

In this chapter, we offer many examples and participation strategies that promote listening for student voices as educators get to know their students, affirm them, and help them find their own voices. As educators learn about microaggressions, implicit bias, and code-switching, they can better support students of all backgrounds.

A final benefit of listening for student voices involves what educators do with what they have heard. While gaining familiarity with students' minds, a listening educator will have a mirror for reflecting on the effectiveness of their lessons. Did the students gain the intended knowledge through this lesson? If so, what is our next step? If not, what can we do differently?

In an identity safe classroom, educators see and disarm inequity and provide learning opportunities that support students to develop voice and identity along with mastering subject area knowledge and skills.

Listening for Student Voices: Making It Happen

Equalizing Status by Making Space for All to Participate

Making room for all students to be heard opens doors for educators to work toward equalizing status among peers. Large classes of students usually have a few who speak up at every juncture. Yet others are more shy and reticent. Some English learners feel awkward speaking and never open their mouths. Finding equitable ways for everyone to participate can be a daily battle.

An important beginning is to discuss with students why an equitable exchange of ideas matters. The teaching of listening as a skill supports adolescents in strengthening their emotional intelligence while cultivating content and linguistic mastery. From there, you can work together to establish specific routines and agreements for sharing the airwaves. Regularly changing the size of the groups—from partners to small groups to large groups—shifts the dynamics, enabling every student to speak. With students in groups, you can circulate, noticing patterns of participation and hearing what is being said.

Large-Group Strategies

In whole-group activities, varying the means of calling on students from the standard hand raising can create more equitable participation. The use of whiteboards, hand signals, and sticky notes requires each student to respond simultaneously, and you can quickly scan the room to see the responses. You can collect the sticky notes and read some of them aloud to the class.

Small-Group Strategies

A range of listening and sharing protocols offers structured ways to teach listening and support students in developing their thoughts by giving specific times and actions for each member of the group.



TALKING STICK

The talking stick (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2015) has been used by various Native American cultures. The stick is passed around the group, and only the person holding it speaks. The talking stick was used to teach patience, self-discipline, and respectful listening. Educators can explain how historically some Native American groups used a talking stick or eagle feather in council circles, potlatches, and other cultural events. As in all strategies, the effective way to use the talking stick needs to be modeled and taught.

- All students listen respectfully to the speaker without talking and with body language that expresses compassion and support to your peers.
- When one student stops speaking, the stick is handed to the next person in the circle.
- When it is your turn, introduce yourself.
- If the receiver does not wish to speak, it is passed to the next person.
- Listen without interrupting.
- Make an effort not to repeat previous comments.

You can always use a symbolic item as a “talking piece,” including a beautiful shell, feather, or an item that means something to the group.

Think/Pair/Share

Partnering has become a commonly used strategy for encouraging participation. As such, it is worth taking the time to analyze it and ensure that its full potential for identity safety is realized. “Think/pair/share” involves asking students to think independently, then discuss with a partner, and finally share with the class. It can be used in a variety of ways by allowing students to explain a process or concept in their own words, explore their opinions on a topic, and respond to higher-level thinking questions. It can be part of a quick reflective experience or a longer activity that incorporates accountability strategies, such as asking each partnership to write down three main points that will be collected. While partners are working, educators can circulate. When the group-share time arrives, educators can refer to ideas that were heard or ask partners to share with the whole group. When using this strategy, it is important to teach, model, and practice to establish and sustain contributions that are robust and stimulating without being superficial.

When teaching the steps and expectations of partner sharing, explain the objectives, including the time frame allotted to speak and how to demonstrate respectful listening. Students can model the process, followed by a whole-group conversation to reflect

on how well they met the objectives. This involves addressing content as well as their successes for working together, which include participating equally and listening to each other.

When educators pay attention to who is partnered together, they ensure that (1) one student is not doing all the thinking or working, (2) students are not turning work time into social time, and (3) all students are participating and coping well. Sometimes, pairing advanced students with those in a middle range is more effective than pairing an advanced student with one who is operating at a much less advanced level. The advanced student may become impatient and do all or most of the work while the other student may quit trying from a sense of inferior capability. Rather, pairing a midlevel student with a student who is less advanced increases opportunities for both to participate. In some classes, sticking with pairings for up to a semester brings deeper levels of connection and collaboration. For other classes, rotating pairs more frequently is useful as a way of gaining more experience through shorter pairings with various personalities and energy levels.

Think/pair/share and partnering activities are a valuable leading-edge method of formative assessment.

Jigsaw

The “jigsaw” method (Jigsaw Classroom, 2019) allows students to gain expertise on a topic and teach the new information to their classmates. Students first work in expert groups where together they learn a particular segment of content. Then, they go into a second group where each one is an expert in a part of the content and shares it with their other peers. This model gives each student the opportunity to be the “expert.” Social psychology professor Elliot Aronson (Aronson & Patnoe, 1997) attributed



USING THINK/PAIR/SHARE TO CULTIVATE A GROWTH MINDSET CULTURE

An additional benefit of think/pair/share is to create a sense of classroom community where students are learning from each other.

- Think or write: Ask students to reflect on three aspects—what they did well, what aspects need growth, and what they will do differently in the future.
- Share three ideas with a partner.
- Students share their partner’s three ideas with the class.

In this way, students can learn from each other. Often, time does not permit everyone to share. If this is the case, they can write their partner’s ideas on a sticky note and post it. The educator can then select several sticky notes to share with the group.

the creation of the jigsaw method to his University of Texas (UT) graduate students. After some racially charged incidents that created tension among students in a high school, the graduate students developed the jigsaw method to offer a safe way for each student to make a significant and equitable contribution to the learning of the whole group.

Structured Listening Protocols

Structured listening protocols are carefully timed activities in which each student speaks on a particular topic while peers listen. The listeners then ask clarifying questions and

JIGSAW STEPS



The *Jigsaw Classroom* website (www.jigsaw.org) offers the following steps for this process:

1. Divide students into small groups of five or six students, referred to as Jigsaw Groups.
2. Assign a group leader.
3. Divide lesson content into five or six discrete content areas.
4. Assign each student in the Jigsaw Group to a different content segment.
5. Allow students to read their content segment once or twice without memorizing it.
6. Form Temporary Expert Groups. One student from each of the Jigsaw Groups comes together with the others who studied the same content segment.
7. Have Temporary Expert Groups discuss the segment they read and identify main points.
8. Return students to their Jigsaw Groups.
9. Ask each student to present and teach their segment to the rest of their Jigsaw Group.
10. Circulate to listen to groups working together and to clarify any points of confusion. Also, ensure that there are no problematic group dynamics.
11. Give a quiz or a simple writing activity at the end to ensure content has been learned.

Adjust the steps to meet your classroom's needs. This method equalizes status and offers each student a chance to learn independently, be scaffolded with members of their Temporary Expert group, and finally become the expert in their Jigsaw Group.

give feedback, and finally the initial speaker reflects on what they heard. A wide range of structured listening protocols can be used to develop the following specific skills:

- Listening without interrupting
- Asking for clarification
- Responding to high-level analysis and synthesis questions
- Hearing and responding to valuable feedback from peers

Careful preparation and monitoring ensures students understand the objectives of a structure that asks them to listen without interrupting, as the idea may be foreign to them. Carefully timed steps provide each participant with an equal time to speak. Using these strategies offers students a rare opportunity to be fully heard without the typical interjections. They learn that a crucial part of listening is honoring the speaker without cutting in or responding prematurely, although they might be tempted to do so.

What follow are two examples of structured listening protocols. Writing prompts and directions can focus on virtually any topic and can be aligned with learning standards and goals.

Method One: Storytelling Protocol

1. *Introduction* (2 min.): Define the purpose and explain the process to the entire class. Provide a fair method to determine the speaking order (e.g., their birthdays). Instruct them to select a timekeeper.
2. *Individual quick-write* (10 min.): Give time for individual reflection and writing. Provide questions on prompt sheets to elicit ideas and/or a personal story.
3. *Individual speaker time* (5 min.): Ask each speaker to choose how to describe the answers to the questions on the prompt sheet. Have speakers share at least two ideas with no interruptions.
4. *Group members respond to the speaker* (2 min.): They paraphrase what they heard, make suggestions, or express appreciation to the speaker. Speaker is to remain silent and listen.
5. *Speaker responds* (1 min.): Speaker responds to what was heard.
6. *Repeat* (8 min. per speaker): Do steps 3–5 for each member of the group.
7. *Small-group reflection* (2 min.): Small group reflects on the process of working together.
8. *Whole-class reflection* (5–10 min.): Students reflect on what they learned and share insights.

Method Two: Dilemma or Problem-Solving Protocol

1. *Introduction* (2 min.): Define the purpose and explain the process. Explain how the class will work with the information that results from solving this problem or dilemma. In some cases, students select one of the solutions to try. Provide a fair method to determine the speaking order. Instruct them to select a timekeeper.
2. *Individual quick-write* (10 min.): Give time for individual reflection, thinking, and writing. Provide questions on prompt sheets that describe a dilemma or problem. Ask students to pose solutions.
3. *Individual speaker time* (5 min.): Speaker shares about the problem and proposes solutions with no interruptions.
4. *Group members respond to the speaker* (2 min.): They paraphrase what they heard and ask clarifying and probing questions to go deeper into the problem and proposed solutions. Speaker is to remain silent and listen.
5. *Speaker responds* (1 min.): Speaker makes clarifications and answers probing questions.
6. *Group members offer suggestions* (3 min.): The group proposes additional solutions.
7. *Speaker responds* (2 min.): Speaker draws conclusions, summarizing learnings from the process of both thinking about the problem and hearing suggestions.
8. *Repeat* (13 min. per speaker): Do steps 3–7 for each member of the group.
9. *Small-group reflection* (2 min.): Small group reflects on the process of working together. In some cases, they select a solution and continue working to implement it.
10. *Whole-group reflection* (5–10 min.): Whole group reflects on the different problems and dilemmas, sharing the solutions. Sometimes, they come to consensus on a solution and work together on next steps.

Note: Determine the size of the groups by the time available.

Incorporating Active Participation, Anticipatory Set, and Closure as Part of Identity Safety

A beginning social studies teacher in a North Carolina high school said to his coach, Janet, “I’m sorry, but I prefer to not interrupt the flow of my lectures to have the students express their ideas.”

Janet, a bit surprised, replied, “Then how can you know what the students are really learning? How do you know they really are listening, even when the class is quiet?”

Janet explains that beginning teachers often ask her how can they design lessons to ensure that their students' minds are continuously engaged. She shares *active participation* with them, an approach in which students are actively engaged for a minimum of once every 10 minutes. Active participation is a way to promote listening for student voices because when students participate, the process to encourage them to express and be heard becomes both obvious and natural. It also validates their thinking as an asset. For students who have experienced adverse learning experiences, ascribing value to their thinking is critical to reshaping their relationship to learning.

Active participation is a strategy drawn from the work of Madeline Hunter, a UCLA professor, who is known for developing mastery teaching strategies. Two kinds of active participation are characterized: *overt active participation*, in which the students outwardly express their thinking verbally or in writing, and *covert active participation*, where students are asked to be engaged within their minds through questions, visualizations, or problem-solving exercises.

Hunter (1982) promoted the use of active participation continually throughout a lesson. It is used during the *anticipatory set*, while initiating a lesson by accessing what each student already knows about a topic. A simple question given to students can spark their interest. Jamal, a math teacher, wanted his students to understand number components, so he gave his students a question: Which would you rather have: a penny doubled each day for a month or \$1,000,000? (Answer: In 30 days of doubling a penny, you accumulate over \$5,000,000). The students were totally captivated.

Lessons continue with a variety of strategies inserted every 10 minutes, including prompts to elicit covert participation, such as a question or visualization, together with overt participation, including a quick-write, think/pair/share, or asking students to record responses on a whiteboard.

Similarly, Hunter's model of *closure* asks each student to use active participation to individually summarize the key learnings of the lesson. Again, this can be done with partners, quick-writes, or "exit cards" handed in as students leave the class. Short closure activities consolidate learning and assist with retaining content.

Active participation is also used to elicit student opinions or experiences. When I was a school principal, I was called to an eighth-grade classroom after a bullying incident. Initially, the students appeared uncomfortable and were not willing to share. So I handed out sticky notes and asked students to write about their personal experiences with bullying without adding their names. I collected the notes and read some aloud, careful not to "out" any particular student. I now had their rapt attention and learned their true feelings about the situation. Then, they could discuss solutions openly.

With practice, incorporating active participation becomes a regular part of all lessons. Active participation is a powerful engagement strategy that invites students to feel heard and more deeply connected with content and their peers.