



Student Voices

What engages students, in their own words

September 2020

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What engages students in school and learning? How do students understand and describe their own learning experiences? We can learn a lot about students and their perspectives by listening to their needs, wants and successes.

In 2018, EQAO asked 120 Ontario students to share their opinions and experiences concerning school and learning. To delve into their views, we asked the students five targeted questions:

- What do you want next year's teacher to know about you?
- What about your school makes you hopeful about learning?
- What do you love about school or learning?
- What would you change to make your learning better?
- Complete this statement: I do my best learning when ... because ...

Students from 14 elementary and nine secondary English- and French-language public schools in Ontario volunteered to share their ideas and experiences (43 students in kindergarten to Grade 5, 48 students in Grades 6–8 and 29 students in Grades 9–12). From the students' responses to these five questions, three key themes about their learning emerged. These themes, detailed below, were expressed differently by students in different age groups. Students begin by developing their personhood, and their learning experience is shaped by their connections to and support from peers and teachers (student as person, K–Grade 5). As they grow, they begin to prioritize their needs and wants as learners (student as learner, Grades 6–8), and eventually, students demonstrate responsibility and greater participation in their own learning journeys and school communities (student as citizen, Grades 9–12).

"I always want the teachers to know my whole capabilities."

An Understanding Teacher

When asked what they want their teachers to know about them, students voiced a desire for teachers to know them as people and as learners. However, students prioritized different domains of teacher-student knowledge according to their grade level:



STUDENT AS PERSON

(K–Grade 5)

- Details about personal life
- Learning preferences
- Favourite subjects
- Strengths and weaknesses

"I want my next year's teacher to know my name, and I have a sister. I want them to know that because I think names are special to everyone, and I love my sister because she's part of my family."

"I would like her to know my strengths and weaknesses, because I believe it is important so that she can teach me more."

STUDENT AS LEARNER

(Grades 6–8)

- Learning preferences
- Personal dedication to learning
- Behaviours that could be perceived negatively

"My next year teacher should probably know that I always try my hardest, but I don't always participate as much as I should."

"I want my teacher next year to know that I enjoy learning, and I love being at school, and I am very dedicated to my education."

STUDENT AS CITIZEN

(Grades 9–12)

- Learning strategies
- Personal dedication to learning
- Behaviours that could be perceived negatively

"It would be good for my teacher to know that I like to know the why of things because I'm curious."

"I often find sometimes teachers look at us through the lens of teenagers and just being careless. I would like them to know that, yes, I am hard working and responsible, because I want them to know that they can trust me and I'm out here to do my best."

In kindergarten to Grade 5, it was important that teachers were aware of students' personal stories as well as their favourite subjects and strengths and weaknesses as learners.

In Grades 6–8 and 9–12, students wanted their teachers to know about how they learn, how hard they work and factors that affect their behaviour during learning activities.

The school creates “a very safe and lovely environment to get people excited about learning.”

A Caring School Climate

There was a strong consensus among students about the importance of a caring, inclusive and comfortable school climate (67%). This theme emerged in all three groups, although students differed in how they described the context of their schools:

STUDENT AS PERSON

(K–Grade 5)

- Friendly and caring peers
- Kind and helpful teachers

“What I love about school is the nice friends and teachers ... And they take care of us and they say we can do anything if we put our minds to it.”

“I think that our school makes students excited to learn because of all the nice people.”

STUDENT AS LEARNER

(Grades 6–8)

- Friendly and caring peers
- Helpful and motivating teachers
- Inclusivity

“I love the inclusiveness and how we are all such a big community.”

“What I love about school is that the teacher’s always encouraging people to work harder and to become better.”

STUDENT AS CITIZEN

(Grades 9–12)

- Importance of diversity
- Helpful and motivating teachers
- Inclusivity

“I really like the community that I have with my friends that I’ve made, and how it’s really diverse, and I can learn new things about people, and that I’m accepted as well because everyone else wants to be, because we’re all different.”

“That there are many teachers who want to ensure our success, and that even if we are not necessarily good at a subject, we will be able to retain a base that can follow us for a long time.”

A supportive school community is what 73% of students reported making them hopeful about learning, and what 48% of students said they love about school or learning.



“I learn best when the teacher is aware of my learning style, my work speed, and my needs as a student and as an individual who wants to learn.”

Growing Needs for Independence, Flexibility and Choice

Students voiced diverse ideas about what they wanted to change so that they could learn to the best of their abilities. Through the range of responses, a need for independence, flexibility and choice in learning emerged and continued to grow in the middle and high school groups.



STUDENT AS PERSON

(K–Grade 5)

- More quiet time and listening
- More support from the teacher

STUDENT AS LEARNER

(Grades 6–8)

- More tools and learning opportunities
- More time for tests and assignments

STUDENT AS CITIZEN

(Grades 9–12)

- More group discussions
- More individualized support
- More options for course selection

“I would like it to change so that people listen better, that Madame gives more challenges and that others just listen.”

“When my teacher explains the subject matter and details to me and it helps me to understand better.”

“Tests can put a lot of stress on you, so while doing a test then breaks as well. Breaks get really—I feel like breaks would really help learning and help me learn better.”

“I think adding more technology, teaching us how to do more things. So we’ve already started coding and maybe we can get more into coding and other things also.”

“The fact that there are many individuals in a class means that there are many types of learning, so I would change the type of teaching to have more variety and better learning.”

“Keeping the class, like, interactive, so we aren’t just ... listening to a teacher talk, but have a big group discussion and to have basically an answer to our question, which will lead to an even bigger question, and on and on.”

Some kindergarten to Grade 5 students (23%) expressed ideas about different kinds of learning opportunities, but most students wanted more quiet time and support from their teachers.

The majority of Grades 6–8 students (58%) wanted more options in their learning in terms of time, tools and activities.

This theme was most prevalent in high school students (68%), who wanted to engage more with different perspectives in their classes and more opportunities for individualized support and learning options.

“I think the biggest thing is I would like to hear a variety of student voice. A lot of our student voice comes from academic students who are highly involved. I’d like to hear from students who maybe don’t enjoy school or have troubles at school, and I would like to hear their reasoning.”

Conclusions

While responses were varied and diverse, we learned three main points from students in this study:

- Students of all ages value understanding teachers and a caring school climate. Middle and high school students appreciate classes that address their changing needs for independence, flexibility and choice.
- Students have clear and valuable insights about their own learning experiences and what they want to see improved in their learning.
- Students’ understandings and desires relating to all of these dimensions of school change as they get older.

This study helped us to learn more about students’ experiences in school and, through the students’ eyes, what is important, what makes them engaged and what they want more of in their learning. The students who participated in this study volunteered to share their experiences with educators and fellow students across the province. It will also be important to engage and listen to students who may not be so eager or willing to lend their voices.





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