

Youth Voice: Expanding Educational Agency for Multilingual Learners



Introduction

Educators of multilingual learners (MLs) interact with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in classrooms every day. The following is an excerpt from a conversation between one such student, Nay¹, and one of the authors of this Focus Bulletin, and is part of a series of interviews conducted with youth from different states in the WIDA Consortium. In addition to these youth interviews, the authors also collaborated with educators and families to hear authentic perspectives on youth voice from a variety of lived experiences.

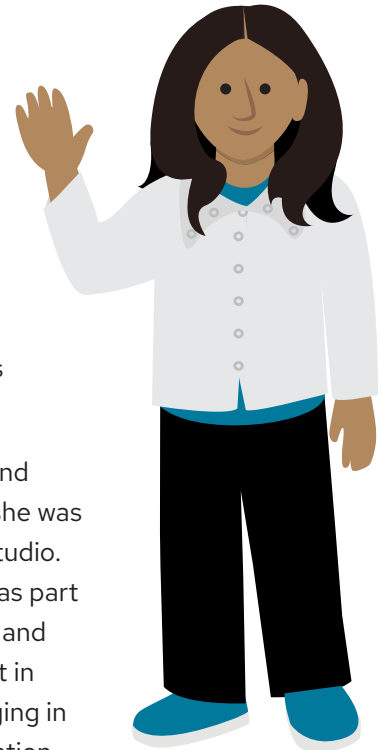
Erika: *If you and your classmates could ask for things that support you while you are at school, what would they be?*

Nay: *I think it depends on the context because I know that it's more work for some people (students) to pay attention and some of the teachers go too fast and that doesn't really help, so it would be much more helpful if they can slow down for some of my classmates. Sometimes the teachers only go at one level, and it can be super boring or sometimes super interesting. Like for me, when it's at my level it's great but I get bored. I feel like I'm just reviewing things but not really learning because it's at my level. But for me, class is a lot more interesting when it's something that I don't even know,*

¹ The student names used in this Focus Bulletin are pseudonyms.

that I'm like, what did that mean? Like one time I went to a little math group in the morning and there they had little things, like things for seventh- or eighth-grade-level math and I didn't even know what it was, but I did catch like one eighth of the question correctly and I didn't get bored because it was interesting figuring it out. I wish everything was more engaging with more fun activities instead of boring things like what is subjunctive. Instead, they could do a fun activity about what is subjunctive. So, even if I'm tired or sleepy, I'm going to stay awake because there is something fun.

Nay is a sixth-grade student at a middle school in a city in the Midwest. She has been enrolled in the Dual Language Immersion (DLI) program in her school district since first grade. Nay comes from a multilingual and multicultural home where her family members speak Spanish, English, and Italian. Her mother is an immigrant from Mexico, and her mother's parents are from Mexico and Costa Rica. Her father is of Italian and Jewish descent. Nay speaks Spanish with her mother, English with her father at their other home, and some Italian with extended family. She tends to watch TV in English at both of her homes but watches some shows in Spanish, especially when she's with her mom.



Some of Nay's favorite activities include dancing, acting, singing, and creating art, and she has been involved in the creative world since she was little. She takes modern dance and ballet classes at a local dance studio. Previously, Nay danced with a Mexican folkloric dance group and was part of her mother's local son jarocho group, practicing regional singing and dancing from the state of Veracruz, Mexico. Nay has also taken part in Día de los Muertos celebrations both at school and at home. Engaging in these traditional practices has helped Nay develop a deep appreciation for the cultural traditions found across Mexico.

Nay's diverse cultural backgrounds are important to her, and she has connections to all of them in different ways. She regularly travels to Mexico, Costa Rica, and Italy to visit her extended family. Additionally, her Jewish identity is very important to her. She celebrates Jewish traditions, has been learning songs in Hebrew with her family, and has been learning about Jewish history on her own by reading historical fiction. Nay and her family have been intentional about Nay's connections to all her cultural roots.

Each student is unique. As educators, we know that this is true, yet elevating the individual perspectives of the youth in our sphere can be challenging in our day-to-day practice. Youth are not just "adults in waiting." They are individuals who should have a role in shaping themselves, their schools, their communities, and society. For this to happen, embracing youth voice must be a foundational part of what we do. We define youth voice as the ways in which students engage with the adults and institutions that shape their educational experiences. Elevating youth voice involves the intentional inclusion of young people in the decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their peers by seeking to understand their experiences and perspectives and engaging them authentically in the issues that matter to them (Region 10 Comprehensive Center, 2021; Youth Sport Trust, n.d.).

Before exploring classroom practices that can support youth voice, it is important to recognize the diverse identities of multilingual learners (MLs) and the assets that their voices bring to the school community. The previous student portrait offers one glimpse into an ML's life beyond the classroom. Additional student examples appear throughout this Focus Bulletin to illustrate the wide range of experiences MLs bring to school, along with reflection questions and a glossary to support educators in elevating youth voice.

Youth Voice: Listen, Collaborate, and Lead

When working to elevate youth voice for MLs, it can be hard to know where to start. Nay's story illustrates one example of the rich cultural and linguistic identities that MLs bring to the classroom. As educators seek to expand opportunities for MLs' educational agency, they should consider how to integrate language and culture into frameworks like Mitra's pyramid of student voice (see figure). The pyramid describes three levels of student participation—listening, collaboration, and leadership. Mitra (2018) states that “the higher a group moves on the pyramid of student voice, the greater the leadership of

students and the greater the benefit for youth. The more students can assume agency . . . the more opportunities they have to learn and to grow” (p. 474). The pyramid narrows at the top because as students move more toward leadership, it can be harder to provide effective support. The agency students enact at the leadership level runs counter to traditional roles of students and teachers and, therefore, student leaders and their adult collaborators need to continually commit to it.

In this Focus Bulletin, we use the term “youth voice” to encompass the voices of all kindergarten- through twelfth-grade-aged youth, regardless of their status as a student. It is important for educators to include the voices of youth who are school-aged but not currently enrolled. We use “student voice” when referring to the “pyramid of student voice” as this is the term used by Mitra.



Adapted from “Student Voice in Secondary Schools: The Possibility for Deeper Change,” by D. Mitra, 2018, *Journal of Educational Administration*, 56(5), (<https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-01-2018-0007>). Copyright 2018 by Emerald Group Publishing.

Listen

Listening, the lowest level of the pyramid, involves adults seeking out what students have to say and interpreting the meaning of their statements (Mitra, 2018). Educators can use this input as valuable data to determine how to improve and support youths' school experience. During an interview with an educator in her school, Heizel, an 11th-grade student, shared her perspective on what listening looks like for ML educators: "The advice I would give to educators about including ideas and opinions of students would be to be able to listen to everybody's perspective because everybody has their own background. Everybody has gone through a lot of stuff, personal stuff, and I believe educators should be able to listen to other students no matter the language barriers that these might include." Listening to ML voices means providing multiple ways for students to communicate and overcome barriers. As Heizel noted, MLs bring diverse experiences and perspectives to the classroom. Educators should give students opportunities to speak, write, illustrate, record, or otherwise share their lived experiences across languages. Intentionally building in time for learning about students can strengthen school structure, culture, and community connections.



Collaborate

Collaboration is the second level in Mitra's pyramid of student voice. Collaboration with MLs can have a powerful impact on how youth express their voices. In the classroom, pedagogical partnerships provide youth with opportunities to co-construct their own learning environments (Cook-Sather, 2023). Vi, a fifth-grader interviewed for this Focus Bulletin, talked about the importance of including all youth when designing classroom activities and described a change that she and her classmates would like to see: "A change that we would make in school is like to include everybody in your group and make sure everybody's like important in your classroom . . . like some of the kids get left behind." Educators should strive to invite and embrace youths' multilingual practices, model multilingualism themselves, and position youth as co-learners (Dover et al., 2025). Nay, the sixth-grader highlighted in the introductory student portrait, emphasized the importance of engaging youths' language expressions: "I have friend that her Spanish is amazing, but, when she takes a test, she gets down because she doesn't do so well and she thinks she's bad at it even though her Spanish is great." Rather than focusing on preparing youth for an English-centered adulthood, educators should collaborate with students to build units of study with personally relevant, linguistically engaging, and culturally sustaining themes. Content and classroom environments should be co-constructed with them and should help the class make a difference in the broader world (Mitra, 2018).



Lead

The third level of the pyramid of student voice is leadership. Youth can show leadership both inside and out of the classroom—student clubs, student government, youth centers, and community organizations also lend themselves readily to authentic youth leadership practices (Mitra, 2018). Authentic leadership experiences are those where youth can work toward self-determination. Adult collaborators should support youth in reflecting on and naming their lived reality, denouncing unfair conditions, and working toward change (Pacheco & Chávez-Moreno, 2021). In interviews conducted for this Focus Bulletin, MLs at all grade levels spoke about conditions they viewed as unfair. Within their schools, youth identified issues of school safety, bullying, and linguistic discrimination. While MLs can often identify unfair conditions in their environment, adult collaborators can work alongside them to help them understand how the unfair practices they see may be the result of contradictions in school, state, or nationwide policies. Adults encouraging youth leadership and self-determination must “actively enter into dialogue with youth about these contradictions and build on the critical consciousness youth may be developing (with parents and families)” (Pacheco & Chávez-Moreno, 2021, p. 533). MLs can lead through a variety of formal and informal roles, such as schoolwide student advisory groups, youth-initiated service project leads, cultural club members, peer mentors, and student advocates. For example, youth in one district led a conversation with their school’s board of education about how dual language programs enhance their linguistic expression and the linguistic expression of others (Pacheco & Chávez-Moreno, 2021). In another context, a group of students “surveyed their peers to evaluate how students’ district-assigned English language proficiency level correlated with their opportunity to take elective courses, interviewed a district administrator regarding district-wide elective policies impacting students designated as ‘English Learners,’ and made recommendations” for policies that they viewed as oriented toward educational justice (Dover et al., 2025, p. 11).



Applying Principles of Listening, Collaboration, and Leadership in the Multilingual Learner Classroom

Regardless of the setting, educators should create opportunities for MLs to serve as instructional collaborators and leaders. Partnering with youth can be a complex task, as many schools require teachers to follow specific instructional units, curricular progressions, or other instructional resources. Youth, including MLs, can be involved from the outset by helping to co-create these materials. Doing so allows units of study to be framed around instructional approaches that increase youth voice and provide more opportunities for youth collaboration and leadership. Two approaches that support this work are critical inquiry (for younger youth) and youth participatory action research (YPAR, for older youth; Mitra, 2018). These approaches provide educators with structures that foster youth collaboration and leadership in instruction. More information about each approach can be found in the glossary.

An Asset-Based Approach to Elevating Youth Voice

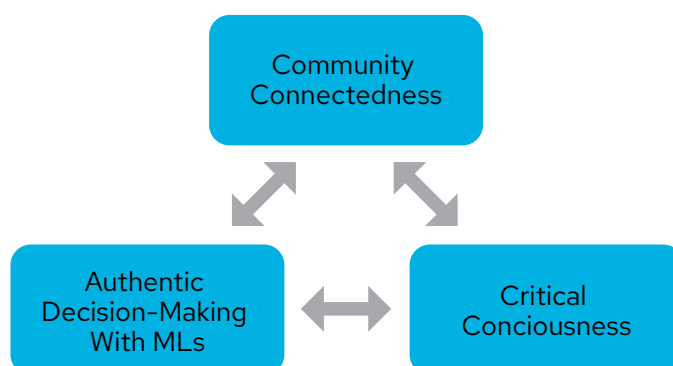
WIDA's Can Do Philosophy informs the way we view youth voice by emphasizing an asset-based approach to elevating the funds of knowledge students contribute to their educational communities (WIDA, 2024). Educators and other adults may be at the beginning stages of listening to youth, or they may be actively equipping them to be educational and social leaders. Regardless of where we are in our journey, centering the contributions that MLs bring to both the classroom and society is fundamental to elevating youth voice.

Dimensions for Elevating MLs' Youth Voice in Schools

When given the opportunity to think critically about issues in the social environment, students are often able to draw conclusions that may not always be visible or accessible to the many adults in decision-making or leadership positions. The unique experiential perspectives that youth can offer around key issues in their schools and greater community are essential to a critical inquiry and participatory process (Dover et al., 2025). When working with MLs, this is important due to the various levels of intersectional identities and external influences impacting their school experiences (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

We offer three ML-specific, evidence-informed dimensions to consider when elevating the voice of MLs in schools, adapted from Wu et al.'s Youth-Adult Partnership Rubric: community connectedness, critical consciousness, and authentic decision-making with MLs (Wu et al., 2014). Within each dimension, educators will find reflection questions about three specific assets—which are also articulated in WIDA's Can Do Philosophy—that may be used to elevate youth voice. These assets are linguistic expression, which allows for and values all the ways in which youth express themselves in multiple languages, modes, and for various audiences; culturally sustaining practices, which allow youth to participate in ways that respond to their cultural norms, rather than simply adhering to the norms comfortable to the adults around them; and experiences and relationships, where youths' lived experiences and social networks are centered and recognized as legitimate sources of knowledge. In combination with themes from Mitra's pyramid of student voice (Mitra, 2018), these assets help unpack specific areas of emphasis for educators of MLs looking to elevate youth voice through listening, collaboration, and leadership.

Everyone is at a different point in their journey to elevate youth voice, so don't be discouraged if there is room to grow. The dimensions identified in this Focus Bulletin serve as a resource to help educators think holistically about supporting youth voice. If you are currently at the listening level of the pyramid of student voice, begin by focusing on a small number of ideas from the following list. Once you have established a foundation to work from, expand to implement more of them.



These dimensions and accompanying reflection questions offer educators and other adults a research-informed tool for identifying ways to elevate youth voice in their schools. They are meant for educator reflection and discussion, not as an exhaustive list. You may add additional factors or questions that are relevant to youth voice in your setting. Since it is a launching point for thought and conversation, it should not be used to evaluate educators or school systems.

During our youth interviews, we also spoke with Nay's mother, who has been heavily involved in her daughters' educational community. She expressed that one of the reasons for her involvement is due to the strong sense of community fostered at Nay's previous school. She shared, "I noticed that at her last school, her principal really creates an inviting space for educators which then they create an inviting space for students and families. Although there were challenges, I was heavily involved for this reason, and as a result Nay was very involved in her school as well. For example, she loves to act and was part of multiple school musicals and I was part of the volunteer committee." This kind of community connectedness is central to youth voice, both within school environments and in the broader communities and social circles youth navigate.

Dimension 1: Community Connectedness

In my current practice, do I . . .

Linguistic Expression

1. Invite youth to embrace their multilingual repertoire, model linguistic versatility, and situate themselves as co-learners and co-constructors?
2. Partner with youth and other educators to challenge practices that minimize and devalue the linguistic resources of MLs?
3. Invite youth to co-construct a new understanding of how they use language in meaningful, purposeful, and intricate ways?

Culturally Sustaining Practices

1. Support youth in collaborating with adults to create an environment that sustains ML identities?
2. Empower youth to integrate their authentic cultural identities as they engage with their community?
3. Support youth by advocating for others to value and respect them as full members of the community?

Experiences and Relationships

1. Encourage and assist youth to participate in groups or programs without suppressing their cultural or linguistic identities?
2. Inspire youth to be active members of the community and participate in activities that support the community and themselves?
3. Facilitate access to meaningful opportunities and experiences both inside and outside the classroom environment where youth can enhance their skills and networks?

Dimension 2: Critical Consciousness

In my current practice, do I . . .

Linguistic Expression

1. Support youth in critical analyses of when and how language is used (e.g., in school signage, class language use policies, or school–community engagement)?
2. Collaborate with youth to build an understanding of how MLs use language in strategic, complex, and continually evolving ways?
3. Empower youth to utilize their full linguistic repertoires and express themselves in ways that disrupt monolingual thinking?

Culturally Sustaining Practices

1. Promote interactions between youth and adults so that youth can analyze which cultures and languages are prioritized in school and in society?
2. Build partnerships between youth and adults to lead the expansion of culturally and linguistically sustaining practices?
3. Create space for youth to share their lived experiences to uplift and honor the diversity of cultures and languages that exist around them?

Experiences and Relationships

1. Equip youth with tools to understand how their lived experiences are reflected at school?
2. Assist youth in identifying and building on meaningful community and school relationships?
3. Trust youth to take the lead in determining how their relationships and experiences can be more fully integrated into the school day?

Dimension 3: Authentic Decision-Making With MLs

In my current practice, do I . . .

Linguistic Expression

1. Encourage the use of youths' full linguistic repertoires (e.g., translanguaging), or the use of interpreters, if necessary, in formal decision-making spaces, such as student advisory councils or government meetings?
2. Enable youth to take on key leadership roles (e.g., co-facilitator, presenter) where they are encouraged to use spoken, written, illustrated, multilingual, or other forms of communication to express themselves?
3. Invite youth to co-develop communication protocols for collaborative school leadership or governance groups?

Culturally Sustaining Practices

1. Collaborate with youth to co-construct units of study with personally relevant, linguistically engaging, and culturally sustaining themes?
2. Involve youth in formal decision-making processes, such as selecting instructional resources or participating in hiring committees, to ensure that they reflect culturally and linguistically sustaining practices?
3. Facilitate the leadership of and collaboration with youth in the planning and implementation of classroom, school, and districtwide initiatives and programs to ensure they represent the full range of cultures and languages present in the school community?

Experiences and Relationships

1. Ensure that youth offer input so that families have access to and are invited to participate in policies and processes related to programming decisions?
2. Encourage youth to draw on their diverse experiences and relationships to identify and advocate for systemic changes (e.g., addressing issues of school safety, bullying, or linguistic discrimination)?
3. Elevate youth into key leadership roles that engage them and allow for active contribution to the greater community?

These questions can be adapted to fit different K–12 educational contexts and are meant to serve as a starting point for educator reflection. Because each school community is unique, educators should consider their specific social context to determine how to best support and elevate youth voice.

Summary and Reflection

To define youth voice, we must recognize that a student’s agency can be closely tied to their perceived position within society and school systems. In general, youth voice refers to the ways students engage with the adults and institutions that shape their K–12 experience. However, this experience is not uniform for all students. When educators and educational leaders talk about centering student voices as vital to improving educational outcomes, it is important to reflect on what that looks like in practice.

Before planning to elicit and include students’ perspectives into pedagogical practices and instruction in the classroom, or decision making at the school, district, or community level, it is important to assess whether the adults involved have the capacity and willingness to make this possible. Otherwise, there is a risk of tokenizing students, a central challenge for MLs who are often marginalized by the very systems expected to serve them. For instance, if the goal is to include students in shared decision-making, educators should reflect critically on questions such as, “How are teachers, administrators, district leaders, and communities positioning multilingual students to participate meaningfully in spaces where decisions are made? In what ways are these students being included in the process? How are they being equipped to express their needs and understand how systems can respond?”

Moreover, many MLs have parents or caregivers who may not have attended U.S. schools and therefore, without cultural context, may not be fully prepared to navigate or influence decisions affecting their children. This makes family engagement especially important. In these cases, elevating MLs' voices often also means including the perspectives of their adult caretakers to support students' best interests and strengthen the partnership between home and school.

Frameworks such as the pyramid of student voice describe three levels of student participation: listening, collaboration, and leadership. For MLs, each of these levels requires intentional adaptation and reflection from educators. Listening to multilingual students and seeking their input often demands additional resources and, more importantly, a broader mindset than traditional models of education typically require from adults. When students' values, languages, and experiences differ from those of their teachers, educators must expand their capacity to understand and support them. The responsibility for adaptation does not only lie with students; adults, communities, and institutional systems must also evolve.

Once schools move beyond symbolic or performative gestures and intentionally position student voices as central to their decision-making processes, they often report more meaningful and holistic student data, authentic collaboration, and increased learning outcomes (Flynn, 2021; Kahne et al., 2022). When adults and decision-makers invite students to communicate their needs effectively and offer input in validating, supportive ways, students are able to engage in genuine collaboration. This collaboration extends beyond the classroom to include families, who often play an essential role in students' goals and aspirations. True collaboration requires youth and adults to co-create learning environments, exchange ideas, and, when necessary, reimagine pedagogical and curricular practices to reflect students' goals and lived experiences. To achieve this, educators and supporting adults must cultivate critical consciousness, cultural sensitivity, and linguistic expression. In addition, they must make an effort to recognize any biases or blind spots they may hold as they guide and support their students in attaining their educational goals through authentic opportunities for leadership development. Ensuring students feel supported, capable, and empowered to act as collaborators in their educational journey allows them to transcend the restrictive boundaries of traditional hierarchies. They may then move from being passive receivers of information to active partners in their own learning process. At this advanced level, students assume greater decision-making authority and develop self-determination. They become more capable of critically examining the systems around them and acting as agents of change in pursuit of their best interests. For a school, classroom, district, or community to reach this level of shared leadership, students must be viewed as valued contributors who are trusted to know what is best for their own learning and are supported by the guidance of the adults around them.

The ultimate goal of elevating youth voice in schools is to develop systems and approaches in which youth and adults work collaboratively toward shared goals. These goals may be co-created through collaboration between students and adults and enacted in student leadership roles. For MLs, this requires recognizing and celebrating diverse forms of multilingual communication and multimodal expressions, implementing culturally sustaining practices, and, at times, adopting policies and protocols for engagement that strengthen relationships and honor each student's unique experiences. Such

a transformation requires students to become the focal point of educational decision-making, with standards and curricula in support. When schools and districts are bold and innovative enough to make this shift, students become more authentically engaged and invested in their learning environments. The resulting outcomes extend beyond academic contexts to include social-emotional growth, higher levels of confidence, and intrinsic motivation. Students nurtured early on as meaningful contributors to their learning environments grow into grounded, empowered leaders ready to share their gifts, pursue knowledge, and positively shape their communities.

Context-Based Questions for Educators Who Want to Elevate the Voices of MLs

1. Who might I collaborate with to support my efforts around centering students in learning and incorporating their voices into planning and decision-making processes?
2. How culturally responsive are our classroom, school, and district policies? Do they support or restrict the use and expression of all students' linguistic and cultural identities?
3. How can I find or create a dedicated safe space for youth where they feel comfortable bringing their whole selves?
4. Will I know how to deal with concerns around the confidentiality and vulnerability of students who share sensitive information? Do I need to speak with parents before students can participate in projects and activities? Are all other adults involved aware of how sharing or revealing certain information may put students and their families at risk?
5. How should we design and structure activities, tasks, and projects so that students can access the materials and engage in their home languages, if necessary, or at their level of English language development?
6. Once I have gathered feedback and input from our youth, what is my capacity to implement it? How much am I willing to adjust my teaching? Am I willing to advocate for changes at the grade level, department level, or school level? Who can I seek out as allies to advocate for such changes?

Glossary

Critical inquiry: Critical inquiry is a process that is related to youth participatory action research, but may be more appropriate for younger students. Its goal is civic engagement, and it is a cycle in which educators and youth pose critical questions, collect information, reflect, and act. Within this process, students should engage in dialogues where diverse ideas are shared in the pursuit of a common goal. This work should also develop a belief in youth that they can make a difference in their schools, communities, and society (Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

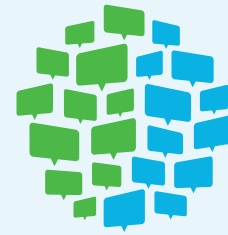
Youth participatory action research (YPAR): YPAR is a cycle of youth reflection, learning, and action. It involves young people identifying and questioning societal or cultural issues, collecting data, analyzing that data, and using that knowledge to create new possibilities through youth–adult partnership (Anyon et al., 2018; Mitra, 2018).

When working with newcomer youth engaged in YPAR, Dover et al. (2025) found that “at times students offered an ‘easy fix’ that even the best-intentioned educators were unable to find on their own. At others, they called attention to complex issues that lack simple solutions, raising questions about district-level policies, state educational mandates, and issues of community and civic significance” (p. 9).

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