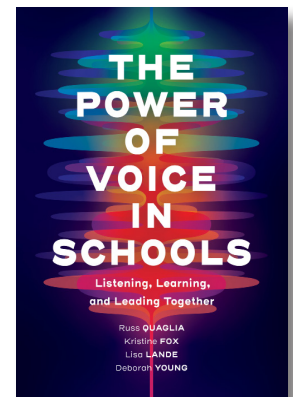


The Power of Voice in Schools

Listening, Learning, and Leading Together

by **Russ Quaglia, Kristine Fox, Lisa Lande, Deborah Young**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In *The Power of Voice in Schools*, Russ Quaglia and his coauthors at the Quaglia Institute for School Voice & Aspirations synthesize the thoughts and experiences of thousands of stakeholders and offer a vision for schools where everyone's voice matters.

Making this collaborative effort successful requires widespread recognition that all stakeholders have something to teach and learn, and they all have a role to play in moving the entire school forward. Student and teacher voice is critical to school improvement. Students and teachers are the potential—not the problem. Working together is the only way to ensure that every student and educator reaches their fullest potential.

When the potential of voice is fully realized, teaching and learning will look and feel different. Listening, learning, and leading with students builds trust, respect and responsibility. Most important, the entire school community will work in partnership with one another for the well-being of students and teachers. *The Power of Voice in Schools* offers a proven way forward that can be used in any school.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The importance of everyone's voice in the school community.
- Lessons learned from listening to voices of the last decade.
- Practical strategies to foster voice for all students.
- A clear definition of voice, self worth, engagement, and purpose,

Hindsight Helps Us Move Forward

We need to realize there is no “us” versus “them” in education; there is only “us”—all learners on a journey of aspirations and growth together.

To be successful, schools must listen to, learn from, and lead with the students, educators, and families who comprise the very life of the school itself.

Voice is a process that leads toward collective action. It involves listening to what people are saying (and not saying), learning from what is being said, and leading together on what actions need to be taken.

Historically, student voice was viewed as gathering students’ opinions and thoughts, rather than engaging students in school improvement efforts.

Teacher voice was directed more toward addressing working conditions than creating a partnership for learning.

Parent voice was seen as sufficient if schools had a PTA or booster club, but parents were not valued as partners whose ideas, perspectives, and actions are necessary for schools to be able to fully support all learners.

Administrators inherently have a voice, but it is still one perspective. The most effective way for a school administrator to use his or her voice is to listen to the voices of others.

When all these voices are engaged in dialogue and the sharing of ideas, when they work in true partnership with one another, meaningful change is achievable. Fostering voice requires all participants to be open to learning from one another and recognizing that everyone has something to teach others. It is time to move forward together, engaging the voices of the entire educational community.

School Voice Today

Although student voice was not an overnight phenomenon, it is now taking the educational world by storm. States, districts—even countries—have embraced the importance of student voice, and the United Nations features student voice in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Despite this increased attention, the voices of teachers and parents are still underrepresented. There are the usual suspects to consider, such as lack of time, insufficient training, and inadequate financial support, but the real issue is the lack of a clear definition of voice and how to embrace it.

Defining Voice

Voice is sharing thoughts and ideas in an environment underpinned by trust and respect, offering realistic suggestions for the good of the whole and accepting responsibility for not only what is said but also what needs to be done.

To develop a common understanding, we’ll explore each component of this definition.

Sharing thoughts and ideas in an environment underpinned by trust and respect. It takes effort and sincerity to build a culture of trust in schools. Also, people are more willing to share their honest ideas and suggestions in a culture of respect. Students respect teachers who take the time to listen to them and are honest with them. They respect teachers who get to know them as unique individuals with equally unique and important perspectives to share. And teachers appreciate those same characteristics in their colleagues and administrators.

Offering realistic suggestions for the good of the whole. Encouraging the sharing of ideas is great, but if those ideas aren’t realistic, then it’s just noise! All stakeholders must recognize that they are part of a larger community and be willing to contribute ideas that consider the needs of others—not just their own.

Accepting responsibility for not only what is said but also what needs to be done. Voice includes not only accepting responsibility for your own ideas and suggestions but also taking action to make them a reality.

The Aspirations Framework

The Aspirations Framework provides a road map for developing voice and supporting students in realizing their dreams. The framework is a research-based set of three guiding principles and conditions, yet it does not provide a prescription or program for implementation.

Aspirations are the ability to dream and set goals for the future while being inspired in the present to reach those dreams. There are two key dimensions to aspirations: dreaming and doing. Today’s schools need to foster students’ aspirations by encouraging them to be both dreamers and doers. Voice is the critical component at the intersection of dreaming and doing.

The Aspirations Profile

The Aspirations Profile offers a model of the behaviors that support or hinder success based on the two dimensions of

dreaming and doing. There are four categories—hibernation, perspiration, imagination, and aspiration—that help us understand how to foster aspirations with different students and teachers.

Hibernation. Students and teachers in hibernation do not think about the future, have no clear goals, and put forth no effort in the moment. Students in hibernation lack a sense of purpose and rarely experience a sense of accomplishment in anything they do. Voice in hibernation is predominantly silent.

Perspiration. Perspiration defines someone who consistently works exceptionally hard but lacks a sense of purpose. Voice in perspiration is active but often undirected.

Imagination. Imagination is characterized by students who readily articulate what they want to be and are able to share their future plans. However, these students show little, if any, effort to reach those dreams. The challenge with supporting voice for these students is to help them focus on their goals and think about how they can achieve them.

Aspiration. Students in the aspiration quadrant can simultaneously think about the future and set goals for themselves. They are also inspired in the present to work toward those goals. Voice in aspiration is productive. Students use their voices with intention, focused on achieving their goals and making a difference for others.

Research shows that voice by itself does not directly affect academic motivation; rather, voice leads to better experiences with the guiding principles of self-worth, engagement, and purpose—all of which greatly affect academic motivation.

Self-Worth: Middle and High School Student Voice

Students who fall through the cracks tend to feel isolated, left out, and as though no one even notices they exist. Cultivating a culture that promotes self-worth requires schools to ensure that everyone is known, valued, respected, and acknowledged for their uniqueness and personal accomplishments.

Although there are innumerable ways to foster self-worth, survey data and focus group work reveal several important themes:

School pride begins with a sense of belonging—of

genuinely feeling welcomed, respected, and appreciated by others in the school community. When individuals feel accepted for who they are, they develop an attachment to the school community and an intrinsic desire to care about and positively contribute to the school.

Names matter to students; they are intensely personal, meaningful, and fundamental to one's identity. Yes, it can be challenging to learn the names of 150 or more students each year, but it is a **MUST!**

Respect emerges when people take the time to understand one another. Respect requires dialogue, openness, and a belief that everyone has something important to say.

Showing up. One area ripe for rapid—and easy—improvement is letting students know it matters if they show up! Currently, only half of students agree with the statement “Teachers care if I am absent from school.”

Standing on the shoulders of giants. Students may or may not rival the accomplishments of Sir Isaac Newton, but it should be noted that they can indeed “see farther” if they have opportunities to learn from positive role models.

Student Voice Strategies to Foster Self-Worth

- Learn prior knowledge. Ask students to share their prior knowledge before beginning a lesson.
- Allow choice in assessments.
- Learn and use names.
- Provide silent opportunities. Strategies such as exit slips, written reflections, and one-on-one conversations provide opportunities for all students to voice their ideas.
- Allow students to be teachers. Voice takes on a whole new level when students use their voice to teach others.

Engagement: Middle and High School Student Voice

How would you rather spend your day learning? Option A: Sitting at a desk, listening to lectures, and taking notes. Option B: Rotating through stations, engaging in dialogue, and sharing insights.

Option B requires students to use their voice in the learning process, whereas Option A lets students pass the time daydreaming. Engagement is about involving student voice—having students participate, question, teach, and self-assess.

We live in an amazing time. There are infinite paths to success, no matter how you define it. People invent in their basements, market on YouTube, and change the world through donations. None of this would be possible without creativity. If adults and students alike never asked “Why not?” and “What if?” then nothing would change. Both curiosity and creativity require an environment that is open and expansive to thrive.

Student Voice Strategies to Support Engagement in the Classroom

- Show and tell—and ask. Share what excites you about teaching. Tell your students what you find fun. Wear your passion on your sleeve! Most important, check in with your students. Ask them about their level of engagement in class.
- Understand that movement matters. Regardless of age—5, 15, or 55—no one likes to sit for extended periods of time. Incorporating movement can be as simple as moving to do group work or as complex as doing role-plays and engaging in outdoor learning.
- Be daring. First, take risks yourself. Do no harm, but as much as possible you should push the envelope in your teaching; in your assignments; and in expressing your concerns to colleagues, administrators, or the school board.
- Say, “Not Yet.” This phrase applies to those trying to cultivate a classroom or school environment that welcomes learning from mistakes and failures.
- Don’t use grades. On a weekly basis, assign a fun, out-of-the-box learning assignment where the goal is simply to learn.

Purpose: Middle and High School Student Voice

Finding a purpose for one’s voice, the epitome of aspirations, is the goal of student voice. Using your voice merely to be brash, complain, or criticize is, quite frankly, tiresome for everyone. However, using your voice to lead and make a difference is an entirely different story. What does it take for student voice to find its purpose?

Students must be trusted to make decisions and be responsible for the decisions they make, including the impact those decisions have on the learning environment. For example, when teachers give students ownership over the format of

their homework assignments, students must abandon their excuses for incomplete assignments. Alternatively, when students provide feedback on a lesson and teachers make an adjustment accordingly, then they must rise to the challenge of the new approach that surfaced in response to their voice.

When students have a voice in the learning process, they also have a responsibility to engage in the changes that result, even if they are not yet ideal.

Everyone needs to challenge the traditional view of leadership in schools. There should be no ranking in leadership when it comes to deciding how to improve the learning environment. True leadership involves listening to, learning from, and leading with others, with a shared goal and a commitment to take action together.

Student Voice Strategies to Foster Purpose

- Explicitly teach leadership skills. Developing leadership skills should be a regular part of the learning that students experience in school.
- Grow decision makers. Just as leadership skills must be explicitly developed, so must the ability to be an effective decision maker. A good starting point is for administration and teachers to be transparent about their own decision-making practices. This will build trust and demonstrate what effective decision-making looks like.
- Ask “who?” rather than “what?” Make an intentional effort to ask students about the type of person they want to become rather than what type of career they want. Ask students if they want to be someone who helps others, builds, creates, or heals.

Never Too Young: Early Learner Voice

In elementary school, enthusiastic learners often speak rapidly and loudly, and they have endless questions. Young learners crave new information, engaging experiences, and acknowledgment that their ideas are worthy. They tell stories about everything from their pet turtle to what their uncle ate for dinner.

However, as students progress through school, their passion and engagement for learning wanes. Students need to know that their voices matter now and will continue to matter in the future. We need to teach our youngest learners that genuine and deep learning includes their active voices.

You may wonder how to effectively capture and listen to the

voice of young learners, given the range of attention spans, comprehension levels, and length of time they can sit still.

At an early childhood center in New Jersey, the educators used picture prompts. The first question for the 4-year-olds was “Who do you like to play with?” Students were shown a picture of kids playing. These pictures were essential and helped get the kids started by facilitating a cognitive connection, which was further developed by some neutral prompting. Students were able to explain why they like to play with specific friends.

Stories are also an effective and engaging way to introduce voice to young students. Choose stories in which characters use their voices and ideas to make a difference for themselves or others.

Student Voice Strategies to Support Early Learners

- **Choice:** Students voice their preferences for everything from which books to read to which games to play at recess. Choice is perhaps the quickest way to honor students’ voice.
- **Students as Helpers:** Students help peers and teachers, which demonstrates the adults’ willingness to learn from students. This strategy also creates a platform that allows students to share their prior knowledge.
- **Relevance:** Students share what is relevant to their lives, and then lessons are adjusted to help students see the connection between what they are learning and their own experiences.
- **Generating Ideas:** Students are provided with brainstorming opportunities as a means to represent that there are no bad ideas.

Awakening All Voices: Teacher Voice

If student voice is so important for learning, isn’t teacher voice equally important? The short answer is yes. In order to fully understand voice, to realize its value, and to support others’ voices, teachers must have a voice themselves. When teacher voice flourishes, so does student voice. And when teachers experience authentic voice, they truly understand why student voice is a must for learning.

In their own classrooms, despite their expertise, teachers are too often told what to teach, when to teach, and how to teach. Most teachers have master’s degrees, and many hold doctorates. Their expertise should be an integral part of

deciding the best course of action for schools.

Teachers and the School Voice Process

All stakeholders must be willing to consider the school voice process from a teacher’s point of view. They need to think about how teachers experience voice in their profession while they are being asked to foster their students’ voices.

Listen. This is where it all begins. Teachers need opportunities to share their honest ideas and opinions, and they also need to be willing to listen to others’ voices. Listening requires a sincere ear and a genuine belief that we can all learn from one another.

Learn. This is where perspectives are gathered and understood. Active listening is a powerful process that honors voice. However, listening without learning is like having a fantastic recipe but never cooking. You may have incredible ingredients and ideas for an amazing dish, but if you never put them together, it all goes to waste.

Lead. Without action, listening and learning fall flat—the process is incomplete. Leading with voice requires honoring what has been learned from others and collaboratively implementing ideas based on informed decisions.

A Promising Partnership: Parent Voice

It is not uncommon for educators to feel that parents should unquestionably be invested in their child’s education, but the actual decisions about how to educate children should be left to the professionals. It’s not parents’ place to tell educators what to do or even how to do it; rather, their role should be a partner with the school to develop a learning environment that benefits everyone.

Educators need to embrace the fact that parents are the experts about their own children. They have valuable insights into who their children are as people, their interests, their strengths and challenges, and the type of environment in which they thrive.

We need to change the narrative of parent partnerships in schools. This includes moving away from mere compliance to positive commitment. What if we viewed parent partnerships as a way of enhancing the learning experience in schools? What if schools believed that parent partnerships lead to richer dialogues, deeper understanding, and more informed decisions?

Historically, parents have consistently been invited to school

presentations and parent conferences, and the data show they feel positive about those events. But they should also feel involved.

Asking parents to volunteer at school events is a step in the right direction, but if parents are only being asked so a school has enough people to handle logistics, then the effort falls short. Parents should be encouraged to contribute to events, discussions, and decisions that affect the school.

Schools need to actively seek the ideas, opinions, and insights of parents in order to foster meaningful engagement and collaboration. Feeling welcome is the first step, and schools must take the critical next step of inviting conversations with parents, so they know their insights are valued.

Constructors of Voice: Administrator Voice

Voice has gotten considerable press recently, but it has not yet gained the necessary traction to be a “way of being” in all schools. For this to happen, leadership must not only understand and support voice efforts in the classroom and staff rooms but also lead schools in a direction that demands voice to realize success.

For voice to truly become part of the foundation of teaching and learning in schools, administrators must commit to making it ubiquitous in all that the school does. Administrators must reflect on who participates. Whose voices are part of the hiring process, curricular decisions, and assessments?

They must consider what opportunities stakeholders have

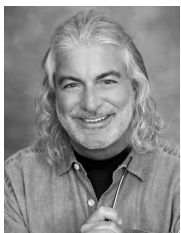
to be involved in the life of the school. And they must be conscious of how they are listening, learning from others, and leading in collaboration with everyone’s voices.

In order for voice to become a way of being in schools, administrators must first articulate the goal and make it universally known. They must then establish a culture that unquestionably values voice. This includes championing voice by

- Actively seeking the thoughts and ideas of teachers, students, and parents.
- Valuing and requiring different perspectives and experiences in decision-making.
- Insisting on student- and teacher-centered learning environments.
- Supporting pedagogy that includes students as creators, assessors, and teachers.
- Realizing that voice is a means to teaching and practicing democratic values.
- Modeling empowerment by supporting voice.

The goal of fostering everyone’s voice in schools is absolutely achievable. For this to occur, we must all embrace a common understanding of what “having a voice” really means.

And for voice to thrive and truly be effective, we must commit to creating a culture driven by trust and respect rather than testing and accountability.



Dr. Russ Quaglia has authored the School Voice suite of surveys and best-selling books, including *Student Voice: The Instrument of Change and Engagement*. He is the cofounder of the Australian Institute for Voice and Aspirations.

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