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Not Finding Their Voice

Russell Quaglia and Michelle Brait

Students feeling they have a voice is a key indicator of emotional safety. Surveys show there's not enough of either in schools.

What would happen if *all* students felt valued and had a powerful voice in school? Might it create a safer environment? Our research at the Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations (QISVA), suggests that it would. When students have a "voice" in school, they feel more known, valued, and cared about and have a stronger sense of self-worth.

Encouraging student voice within a school is key to creating a sense of emotional safety—and leads to greater academic motivation. Fostering student voice means more than encouraging learners to speak up or share their opinions. It's about creating a school culture that encourages students to be individuals, express and challenge themselves, and contribute to the school community.

Since 2001, QISVA has administered a survey of both students and teachers in the United States and abroad to gauge their views. QISVA is currently preparing a report that compiles data from surveys we administered between 2009 and 2018, representing the views of 452,329 students in grades 6–12.¹ These results reflect less-than-ideal realities about how valued and listened to students in this age group feel.

Do Students Feel Known and Valued?

In schools that make room for student voice, students feel valued for who they are. And when teachers listen to students and are willing to learn from them, students feel respected. And yet, according to QISVA surveys:

Only 67 percent of students reported that school is a welcoming, friendly place, and only 45 percent felt like a valued member of their school community.

56 percent of students reported that teachers make an effort to get to know them.

50 percent of students agreed with the statement, "Teachers care if I am absent from school."

Only 48 percent of students reported that adults in their school listen to students' suggestions.

54 percent agreed that "adults and students work together to make our school better."

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In focus groups, we heard many comments like that of 11th grader Nicole: "Every day I try to survive in a place that cares more about my grades than about me as a person."

Does *Everyone* Feel Accepted?

Ideally, 100 percent of students should respond "yes" to the question of whether they feel accepted at school. A culture in which not everyone feels accepted leaves space for bullying to thrive. But according to our surveys:

71 percent of students reported feeling accepted for who they are at school. (This means more than one out of every four students feels *unaccepted*).

44 percent of respondents said bullying is a problem at their school.

20 percent reported that they have difficulty fitting in.

Focus group comments indicated that in many schools, bullying is a systemic problem—and not just between students, but teacher-to-student, teacher-to-teacher, and administrator-to-teacher.

Do Students Have "Go-To" Teachers?

Caring teachers create communities where everyone's perspective is appreciated—and where students feel comfortable expressing themselves because they know adults care. Responses addressing this aspect of voice weren't entirely disheartening, but weren't ideal either:

76 percent of students identified a teacher who is a positive role model (leaving nearly 25 percent without an adult at school whom they can look up to).

Only 56 percent said there is a teacher they can turn to if they have a problem.

Only 49 percent said teachers care about their problems and feelings.

Comments like this 9th grader's surfaced in focus groups: "I really like Mr. Wilson ... but I'm pretty sure he doesn't really know me. I don't feel like I can ask him for help."

Making It Better

While these findings are sobering, there are ways for educators to begin to bring out all students' voices more and help students feel listened to, accepted, and cared about.

Connect with students—immediately. Find out what your students enjoy, what they hate, if they eat alone at lunch, what interferes with their learning. Let students know that you care by learning about them.

Let students know you're always there as a source of support. One example of fostering voice is the intensive SAAP program (Student Aspirations Advocates Program) at Reseda Charter High School in California. SAAP targets incoming 9th graders who have been identified as lacking a voice or adult support in their educational career. SAAPers attend monthly, small-group lunches with staff members and engage in community-building activities that focus on a range of topics, including self-worth, belonging, and voice.

Listen to and work with students. Set up systems that incorporate student voice and participation into all aspects of school in order to ensure that students feel valued and free to reach their fullest potential.

We at QISVA often hear that teachers can barely keep up with all their teaching demands, let alone get to know every student. But there's an irony worth noting: When teachers know their students and their voices, students' ownership for learning increases. Teaching becomes easier.

Emotional safety and learning should never be mutually exclusive. When schools commit to providing students with a voice, they can achieve both.

Endnote

¹ The final findings of this report are scheduled to be published in October 2019 on QISVA's website at <http://quagliainstitute.org>.

Russell Quaglia is the executive director of the Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations. He is the author of many books, including *Cay and Adlee Find their Voice* (ASCD, 2019) and *The Power of Voice: Listen, Learn, Lead Together* (ASCD, forthcoming). **Michelle Brait** is the SAAP coordinator and a special education teacher at Reseda Charter High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

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