

Student Voice

Do Students Really Have a Voice in Your School?

Dr. Russ Quaglia, Executive Director;
Dr. Kristine Fox, Senior Field Director;
Quaglia Institute for Voice and Aspirations

Student voice has become one of the most accepted educational concepts in schools today. Countries and states have adopted policies to promote student voice, and individual schools are eager to tout their distinctive success stories. Cheers to all the schools moving forward to ensure that student voice is a core component of learning and teaching! While this progress should be celebrated, we must proceed with caution. With the rise in popularity of student voice, it is more crucial than ever to pause and take a deep and honest look at schools' understanding and implementation of student voice. It is critical that the distinction be made between the true integration of student voice in schools and the existence of student voice at a solely superficial level.

For starters, saying "We are giving kids a voice at our school" misses the mark. It is not about "giving" students voice. Students have always had a voice. Yet, they have not always been heard. Schools need to create environments in which students are encouraged to develop and use their voices. Student voice is truly present when students share their thoughts and ideas in an environment built on trust and respect; student voice exists when students offer realistic suggestions for the good of the whole; and student voice reaches its peak when students take responsibility for not only what is said but for what needs to be done. Schools of action do not "give" students a voice—they incorporate the voices their students already have into everything they do.

On the other hand, student voice is positive, outward thinking, genuine, proactive, knowledgeable, and solution oriented. Student voice is focused on taking action for the good of the whole.

It is indeed encouraging to see so many schools pursuing genuine student voice initiatives. These efforts include ensuring that *all* students have meaningful roles and responsibilities in decision-making, providing voice training for students and staff, and implementing strategies to ensure that voice is a way of being. However, it is disheartening to see just as many schools proclaiming success with student voice when the actual efforts are cosmetic and sporadic. In such cases, student voice is relegated to a leadership club, a stand-alone event at the end of the week, or a counsellor activity. If you identify "student voice" as a particular period in your school's schedule, reserved for a designated club, or a special event, then it is time to reassess what student voice means in your school.

The Impact of Student Voice

When student voice is actualised in schools, there are no accolades or fancy brochures announcing it. In fact, it is often the schools with less fanfare about student voice that are the ones more effectively integrating it in their schools. That is because student voice is *for the students*. It is at the core of the school's culture and is valued for the purpose of impacting learning and teaching. When students have a genuine voice, they are three times more likely to experience self-worth in school, five times more likely to be meaningfully engaged in their learning, and five times more likely to have a sense purpose; all of this leads to greater academic motivation to learn (Quaglia et al., 2020).



Table 1: Student Voice in Action

Policy/Practice	Student Voice in Action
Student management	Adults collaborate with students on the development and implementation of the school's student management and discipline systems. Peer mediation and peer courts help students become responsible for their own behaviors.
School curriculum	Students receive training for and are involved in evaluating and selecting curriculum, textbooks, and course offerings; this includes meeting with vendors. Students co-present at parent curriculum nights.
Staff meetings	Students have a genuine role in department, grade level, and staff meetings. Leaders ensure that students are consistently and meaningfully involved.
Student feedback	Student feedback is sought on a regular basis in order to develop a shared responsibility for changes that improve learning. Discussions lead to concrete actions by students and teachers.
Network meetings	Students have a necessary role at the network level. The network ensures that meetings include a diverse group of students and perspectives.
School mission and vision	Students help craft the school's mission and vision statements, and ensure that the end result includes voice. There is a shared responsibility for making sure all students and staff know the school's mission and vision.
New staff hiring	Students are involved in the process of interviewing potential new hires. Students have autonomy for designing a few of the interview questions and also provide feedback on candidates.
Administrative councils	Administrative councils are comprised of a diverse group of students. Students are responsible for seeking out and accurately representing the entire student body.
Course selection	Students' ideas and suggestions are incorporated into course offerings and scheduling. Students are aware of school and classroom budgets and are guided through understanding how school resources are allocated.
Schoolwide events	School events reflect current students' ideas, opinions, and interests. Students are responsible for the promotion and execution of schoolwide events.
School website	The website represents the importance of student voice and appeals to both student and adults. Students design and manage a portion of the school's website.

Consider how effectively your school integrates student voice. When and how do you listen to students and incorporate their ideas? If you tend to listen only in passing conversations in the hallways, then student voice is merely a tool of convenience. However, if you can identify how student voice is incorporated throughout your school's practices and policies, then your school values student voice as a meaningful necessity.

To truly actualise student voice and optimise motivation, school leaders must consider how student voice is living in the school's policies, procedures, and practices. Table 1 reflects areas where student voice can be operationalised in schools in ways that are truly impactful.

Collaboration is a Cornerstone

School leaders have a fundamental choice: to either design their practices in isolation from students, or to collaborate with students throughout the planning and implementation process. Leaders' actions (or lack thereof) will set the tone; when students are an inherent part of decision-making and an integral part of purposeful plans, student voice becomes ubiquitous. Choosing collaboration reflects the value of student voice and helps ensure it becomes common practice, throughout each school day and academic year.

While it has long been standard practice to utilise teacher feedback to improve learning and teaching, it is not yet common practice to utilise student feedback for the same purpose. In a school driven

by student voice, leaders value student feedback on teaching as an authentic means to improve learning. Students, just like adults, want their schools to develop self-worth, include lessons that lead to meaningful engagement, and promote a general sense of purpose in the present and for the future. Students want to know that they, and their ideas, *matter*.

Collaborating with students and actively seeking their feedback unequivocally demonstrates not only that students matter, but that they have as much responsibility as teachers do to create a positive learning and teaching environment. There are countless opportunities for students to offer meaningful ideas on issues and practices that can positively influence their education. We must invite them as partners to the decision-making table.

Noise vs. Voice

As schools move toward voice-centred learning environments, it is important to distinguish noise from voice. Noise comes in the form of complaints, self-centredness, whining, blaming others, expecting someone else to address issues, and closed mindedness. Noise exists when students think everyone else should do what they say. On the other hand, student voice is positive, outward thinking, genuine, proactive, knowledgeable, and solution oriented. Student voice is focused on taking action for the good of the whole.

Student Voice

Leaders who can distinguish noise from voice, and nurture the latter, are poised to lead together *with* students. When the choices and actions of school leaders put student *voice* at the forefront, schools will truly become a place where everyone has a meaningful role, and responsibility, for success. This is achievable when school leaders, and all stakeholders, believe that students are the potential rather than a problem, and that students of all ages and abilities have something to teach them.

With the above established as a foundation, your school can claim “We value and understand student voice in my school.” In order to integrate student voice and build internal capacity and sustainability, schools must ensure that:

- Appropriate accommodations are developed to hear the voices of students with special needs.
- Building and classroom instructional practices are designed to listen, learn, and lead with students.
- Ongoing professional learning opportunities and dialogue related to student voice are a priority.
- A variety of informal student leadership opportunities are accessible to *all* students.
- Leadership and communication skills are intentionally taught and practised at each grade level.
- Teachers have a voice in school; teacher voice must be valued in order for student voice to grow.
- Mentors help new staff and students learn about the importance and impact of student voice.
- Success criteria are established to measure the impact of student voice.
- All stakeholders know the school’s goals related to student voice.
- The school’s mission, goals, and website represent the importance of student voice.
- Leadership roles are held by a diverse group of students.
- Students regularly participate on committees with adults (e.g., curriculum committees, staff meetings, and interviewing potential new hires).

Student Voice: A Way of Being

It is important to remember that student voice is more than a survey or a single event and it involves more than a select handful of students expressing themselves. While these are not negative in and of themselves, they are only a token and superficial nod to voice. For student voice to be developed in schools, a trusting relationship must exist between and among students, staff, and the administration. For student voice to become impactful, it must be embedded in the fabric of decision-making, always with an eye on enhancing learning and teaching.

When students have an active voice, whether they get what they are asking for or not, they know their ideas matter and that they are listened to, valued, and respected. When school leaders commit to integrating voice in schools, it becomes a natural way of being.

When schools involve students as collaborative partners in learning, the notion of student voice is no longer looked upon as something special, but rather as an integral part of what defines a school. It is time we celebrate and learn from the schools that are truly practising student voice, not the ones that have the brightest brochures.

References

- Quaglia, R., Fox, K., Lande, L., & Young, D. (2020). *The power of voice in schools*. ASCD



Dr. Russell Quaglia is the Executive Director of the Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations. He is a pioneer in the field of education, known for his unwavering dedication to student voice and aspirations. His innovative work is evidenced by an extensive library of research-based publications and media appearances. Dr. Quaglia is a frequent visitor to schools and institutions around the world, demonstrating his passion for ensuring that the voices of students are always heard, honored, and acted upon.



Dr. Kristine Fox is a Senior Field Director at the Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations. She has led professional development initiatives at the state, national and international level. Dr. Fox is a former teacher, school administrator and author of several articles and best-selling books, including *Aspire High: Imagining Tomorrow’s School Today* and *The Power of Voice in Schools*. She is committed to supporting schools in their journey to insure the voices of students and staff are heard.