

The Word on Voice

Russell Quaglia explains why it's time to start listening to students and teachers.

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Meaningful school reform starts with your most powerful partner— your students!” That statement is used to describe education pioneer Russell Quaglia’s most recent book, [Student Voice: The Instrument of Change](#) (2014). In it Quaglia, executive director of the [Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations \(QISA\)](#) and the founder and chair of the Teacher Voice and Aspiration International Center, and co-author Michael Corso present a blueprint for enacting a successful partnership between educators and students.

A former principal known for his unwavering dedication to student voice and aspirations, Quaglia and QISA have been “guided by the belief that students are the potential, not the problem, in today’s educational system.” He says, “We are driven by the importance of student voice and a conviction that students have something to teach us. They are our partners on this educational journey.”

Quaglia spoke with NAESP Executive Director Gail Connelly about his research around student voice, as well as how teachers and principals around the world have embraced the concept of learning from their students.

GAIL CONNELLY: In the introduction of your book, *Student Voice*, you write that it is time to listen to the students. What is student voice and why is it getting so much attention right now?

RUSSELL QUAGLIA: Student voice means a lot of things to a lot of different people. We describe student voice as students being able to communicate openly and honestly in an environment that is not only willing to listen, but willing to learn from what is being said. Listening and learning are really important because it’s not just about giving kids a voice—it’s making sure that students can share that voice in an open and honest way. Student voice is only useful if it exists in an environment that’s willing to listen [because] so often nothing happens to the voice of kids because no one is really listening. The simple reason for this is [educators] don’t think they can learn from what students are telling them. That thinking is just wrong. I thought a lot about why student voice is such a hot topic and, quite frankly, I think it comes down to the compelling data that we’ve been collecting. I’ve been talking about student voice and aspirations for over 30 years now. And through those times, not many people said to me student voice is ridiculous and it doesn’t matter. But until recently, I didn’t have real data to support my claims—that is what policymakers and the real decision-makers out there want.

What we’ve found over the past few years is that when kids believe they have a voice, they are seven times more likely to be academically motivated. Student voice is no longer just a good idea; it really is having an effect on academic performance.

CONNELLY: For those who are being introduced to student voice for the first time, how would you connect for them this notion of student aspirations leading to student voice?

QUAGLIA: For us it was the other way around. We connected student voice to student aspirations and then, ultimately, to student achievement. We made these connections in an incredibly careful and systematic way because we never wanted to overstate something and

not be able to prove it. Thus, the very first step we took was to take time to listen to the students because we believed they had something to teach us.

And taught us they did. What we learned was this: When we listened to students, they identified a number of conditions that affected their aspirations. For example, they wanted to have self-worth, they wanted to be meaningfully engaged, and they also wanted a sense of purpose. We then took this information regarding the conditions that influenced student aspirations and did a lot of research connecting those conditions to the three guiding principles—self-worth, engagement, and purpose—and then connecting that back to academic success.

So for example, when kids have *self-worth*, they are five times more likely to be academically motivated. When kids are *meaningfully engaged* in learning, meaning that they understand why they are learning things and how it's connected to them in some way, they are 17 times more likely to be academically motivated.

The Holy Grail of this work is when students have a *sense of purpose*. Put simply, a sense of purpose is driven by us [educators] having an idea of the students' hopes and dreams. When we know students' hopes and dreams, students are 18 times more likely to be academically motivated. The bottom line is that we took what we learned from student voice and student aspirations and connected it to academic motivation.

CONNELLY: As you pointed out, purpose is the Holy Grail. And I can't imagine that you are not getting incredible attention with the statistics that you've just indicated. It's not just this country that's dealing with those issues; how is this playing out in the international arena?

QUAGLIA: The first thing that we've seen on the international front is that key leaders (ministers of education, secretaries of education) are willing to accept the fact that student and teacher voice is something they should focus on and pay attention to. To be clear, it is not that they are giving up everything and ignoring other things they are working on. But they are not afraid to expand the boundaries that are currently set in schools and are open to listening to student voice. For the first time we [QISA] had some data that really made these connections for them (student voice and academic motivation).

I was incredibly encouraged by the support from virtually everyone at the recent Education World Forum. Attending were about 80 ministers of education from around the world, representing almost 90 percent of the world's population, so I was pretty excited to share our work from QISA with them. But I've been around long enough that I know talk can be louder than action, and what I'm hoping is that some of those words of support and excitement from the ministers turns into action. Then I'll really understand and believe how serious they are about taking on student and teacher voice as an important concept to improve schools.

CONNELLY: Can you provide some examples of what you've seen in schools where student voice is really having an impact on how things are being done?

QUAGLIA: We have some schools in England called Aspirations Academies. We've seen incredible academic gains since they've been established just three years ago. Now here is the interesting thing: We haven't changed the curriculum, we haven't brought in some high-powered consultant, we haven't changed the standards, and the kids over there are still taking the country's mandated tests. But what we did do is involve students and teachers with the schools.

We let the students and teachers know that it was their school and that they needed to take more responsibility in it. In other words, we gave them a voice! We've seen drops in absences

and tardies by both students and teachers. So it's not just the student attendance that improved, but it was the faculty attendance as well. We've seen discipline issues decline. And we've seen academic gains that quite frankly even surprised us. In short, we made sure students knew they mattered to us, and that we had high expectations for them and their teachers. We've done that in school after school.

It is important to know these were not high-achieving schools to begin with. Students and staff are performing well now because they don't want to let people down. They believe in themselves and they believe they can make a difference in this world. We're also measuring things to the "Nth degree" from post-secondary attainment to graduation rates, to how students are doing from class to class. We look at gender differences. We look at grade-level differences. We look at trend data. It's not just this notion of "feel good" data, which I have an issue with to begin with. But it's really looking at the core of things around discipline and attendance and what we're teaching and why we are teaching it.

We've seen very similar successes over here [in the United States]. We'll go into the schools and work with them and ask where does student voice fit? What are kids telling you about themselves? What do they tell you about their learning environment? What do they tell you about the community at large?

When we go into schools, we identify a number of different areas to concentrate our efforts. The first thing we identify—and this one is really important—is what these schools are already really good at. We don't want to go into schools with a deficit model like we're trying to fix something, because something is broken. We'd rather look at these schools and say, "What are you doing right and, more importantly, *why* are you doing it right? And what can we learn from that to improve the work that we do?" It becomes this kind of self-fulfilling notion of "Wow, we have the skills within our system to make a difference. Somebody might need to identify them for us and someone might need to give us some guidance on some next steps, but we have the ability to make a difference." One of the things I tell schools all the time is, "Be ready because wonderful surprises are just waiting to happen."

CONNELLY: Congratulations on the incredible work that you're doing and the progress that you're achieving. How do teachers fit into the equation? Why are teachers' voices important?

QUAGLIA: There's no question we've learned so much from students over the years. And we continue to do so. But we've also learned a lot from teachers. One of our greatest lessons is that teachers can't be expected to create those conditions that foster student aspirations and voice unless those conditions are in their own professional lives. Like students, teachers must be able to dream about the future and be inspired to reach those dreams. Teachers need to become skilled at exercising their own voice toward the advancement of their own aspirations.

What we found is that when students' and teachers' voices are working in unison, change and improvement on multiple fronts happens much quicker. And these improvements are not just positively affecting students—we also see personal, social, and academic growth for teachers.

CONNELLY: From your perspective, what does principal voice mean and what can principals do to find their own voice?

QUAGLIA: That is an interesting question to me because I'm not convinced principals have a voice yet either. Seemingly, because of their position, we would automatically think they have a

voice—but I think their voices may be stifled as well. I think it is clear that students have something to teach us and teachers obviously have something to teach us. But then I always wonder who is the “us.” What I come down to is that the “us” is *all* of us, including the principals.

We’re all in this together. And they all need a voice. We really have to make sure that principals aren’t just the receivers of the voice, (i.e., being a listener), but they are also the producers of a voice because they have something to say and we have something to learn from them. The bottom line with all this work we’re doing around student, teacher, parent, and principal voice is we all can and must learn from each other. But we’ve got to be ready to listen and we’ve got to be ready to act on what is being said.