

Student Voice: Do We Really Listen to Students?

By Peter DeWitt

"Student Voice is a Movement...not a program." Russell Quaglia
Adults like to talk about school. The other day I was walking through the grocery store and a woman who happened to be blocking the lane was complaining about her child's school to a friend...for all to hear. I swear she took a second glance at me as if she knew that I was an educator.

Teachers and school leaders do it as well. They debate and discuss about how students learn, or try to figure out ways to better engage students who just don't seem to like to talk in school. There is a lot of problem-solving that happens around student engagement, but unfortunately a very important stakeholder is often left out of the discussion...the student.

Lately, I have been reading a lot from Russ Quaglia. Russ is the Director of the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations. Aspirations are something most of us have, so it should come as no surprise that our students do as well. The issue is that before we can find out what our students aspire to be...we need to encourage them to use their voice first. And I'm sorry to say there are schools that do not do a good job at that.

Don't get me wrong. The adults in a school system, as well as policymakers, politicians and other people love to debate what students should learn, and what they need to be prepared for in the future...like 21st century skills...or college and career ready. The sad part is that those same adults do not typically ask for student input. Quaglia and Michael Corso have co-authored an outstanding book recently published by Corwin Press called [Student Voice: The Instrument of Change](#). In the past few months that I have gotten to know Russ he has changed my perspective on including students in the discussions around learning and school. As much as I believed I was including student voice, I was not doing nearly enough.

Principal of Change

As a former elementary school principal I thought I did everything right when it came to student voice. We had a structure in place that acted like student focus groups. We called it Kids Club and it worked really well. We encouraged students to share their thoughts and listened to their suggestions.

I had an open door policy with students. If I wasn't in the office when they came to see me they could make an appointment or leave a note, and I would meet with them to talk through their issue. In addition to my role, we had teachers who would fight tooth and nail to make sure their students were getting what we needed.

We even did surveys. It's not easy to do a survey at the elementary level, but we wrote it to their level, using pictures for the young students and reader-friendly words for the older ones. We brought in

the data, and a few of us even looked at what students wrote. But I'm not so sure things changed for the students.

Michael Corso said there is nothing worse than a school that does a survey, but doesn't change practices. Students know they did the survey, and they also can see when things don't change.

I LOVE Student Voice: We did a survey!!!

Many school leaders and teachers have students complete surveys. Over the past few years it's been a great way to show that schools have taken student voice into account when they made decisions. The problem is that students may have made suggestions but teachers and leaders didn't listen.

Quaglia and Corso believe that although surveys are a great first step, often adults discount what students write on the surveys. They have the research to back up their ideas. They have collected the surveys of over a half of a million students around the world, and the numbers keep growing.

Why don't adults listen to the very surveys they used with students?
Quaglia and Corso wrote (2014)

"Interestingly, the majority of students agree that teachers are not willing to learn from students (QISA, 2013). We must break that culture of "Teacher knows best." Everyone takes their own opinions

with the utmost seriousness. How strange then not to consider others' opinions of equal value."

Russ and Michael understand that students come at the surveys with different perspectives. They wrote, "*Clearly students have not had as many experiences as adults. Nonetheless, no one knows their world better than they do. Students are the absolute experts in their own point of view.*" Quaglia and Corso believe that adults throw student opinion to the side and say that it is just the student's perspective, but perspective is reality for students and adults.

In the End

School is an interesting place. Lots of adults walk around talking about what students should learn, and how they should act. The longer adults walk around with that perspective leaving out the voice of the students, the longer it will take students to learn they truly have a voice. When asked for their opinion, many students will just tell us what they think we want to hear. They will tell us what they have learned through being compliant.

Michael Corso wrote,

"Not sure if my daughters friends would appreciate this, but I was always doing research: Asking questions about schools, teachers, sports, clubs. One day I was driving a carful of seniors to school and I asked, "Do you think students have a voice at your school? They all chuckled as if it were a ridiculous question.

One girl (later the valedictorian of her class) answered, "Mr. Corso, I'm 18 years old. I can vote. I can serve on a jury. I can open my own checking account. I could get married without my parents' permission. I can buy a house if I had the money. And I am allowed to join the army and go to another country and kill people. But between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m., I have to ask a teacher's permission if I want to pee."

If we wonder why some students are not prepared for college or the workforce, it may be due to the fact that for a better part of 17 or 18 years they have had adults telling them what to do, and not really engaging in how to hone their own voice and speak up for something. And students will never truly have a voice....until their teachers do.

Source;

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/finding_common_ground/2014/09/student_voice_do_we_really_listen_to_students.html