

# Are You Going to Make Me Use My Teacher Voice? YES!

*Be the voice you want others to hear.*

For over thirty years, we have been advocating that student voice must be at the core of reform in education, if reform is to be meaningful. It has not been an easy road, and there were certainly stumbles along the way. But each positive step, and each setback, ultimately confirmed that we are right; we must listen to students, for they have something to teach us. *And so do those who teach them . . . the teachers!* For positive changes to occur in schools, everyone and anyone who is truly committed to making a difference must listen to students *and* teachers.

One of the most significant lessons we have learned is that teachers must feel their own voices are valued before they can be expected to promote the voices of students. We have discovered through our research that when teachers have a voice in decision making, they are three times more likely to encourage students to be leaders and decision makers. We have come to realize that teachers must become skilled at exercising their voice in order to support their own aspirations, as well as those of their students. For too long we have assumed that teachers, as adults who have been trained in education, are naturally strong communicators. Certainly that may be the case in many instances, but the vast majority of teachers have not *utilized* their voice to its fullest potential.

The importance of teacher voice may seem like a simple concept to grasp, and one could assume that teachers would be sharing their voices from the rooftops because

they *do* have something to say. But you would be wrong. Only 48% of teachers report believing they have the skills to effectively communicate in their school (QISA & TVAIC, 2015). In addition, only 60% of teachers think their principals are willing to learn from them. Put these together and you get an unfortunate picture: We are expecting teachers to have a voice when they are not yet prepared, and don't feel invited, to share it.

Teachers and students are the fabric of our schools. If students are the heart, then teachers are the lifeblood—the critical element that keeps everything alive. Not surprisingly, student voice and teacher voice share similarities and are inherently connected. We believe that when student and teacher voices work collaboratively, there will be a shift in how educational communities work, and there will be a profound impact on the personal, social, and academic development of students and teachers alike.

## WHATEVER TEACHERS DO, IT IS BETTER WITH STUDENTS

We believe teachers and students share a very special relationship when it comes to voice in three significant ways:

1. *They provide the “insider’s” perspective of what is working and, just as valuable, what is not working.*

What is more valuable to success than understanding the experience of those involved in the endeavor? Perhaps nothing. Successful companies recognize the value of this. They conduct feasibility studies all the time. Stores provide surveys to their clients; they even entice them to participate by providing discounts or a chance to win cash! Organizations conduct focus groups with their target audience to assess their needs.

What do they do with the feedback? They listen to it, they learn from it, and they take action based on what they learn. All this is done with the goal of meeting the needs of the clients and creating the best experience possible for them. Should it really be any different for schools? Schools serve the world's most important clients—today's youth. The purpose of schools is to meet the needs of these clients and prepare the students for life. Studies suggest that the single factor with the greatest impact on students' success in school is teachers (Hattie, 2003). Teachers are the professionals trained to serve the school's clients. Students and teachers are the fabric of the learning environment. To understand how effective your organization is, it only makes sense to ask those with firsthand experiences what their needs are and how well you are meeting those needs. The first step is to ask. It is that simple. Well, it's that simple to get started!

## TEACHER VOICE

A school I was teaching at brought in a new Director. It was a good school and there was much to be proud of, but it was clear he wasn't impressed. Instead of pushing his will on the school, he put everyone in a room and asked us what we thought of our school. We generated pages of ideas. Although he'd already identified many things he wanted to change, he used this exercise to find common ground, tackling those areas first. Soon, the direction was articulated. People were encouraged to reflect on whether this was something

they wanted to be a part of; some people left. New positions were created in the school, creating growth opportunities. Teachers who chose not to apply for these posts were brought on to interview panels, creating further growth opportunities. Voices were heard. People grew. The school changed.

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### *2. They have been largely unheard in ways that are meaningful and productive.*

While in recent years social media have led to the perception of increased teacher and student voice, it is often far too superficial. It is not enough for students to be heard when they attract media attention (good or bad) or when a post goes viral. It is not enough for a teacher to share his or her opinion online, at a staff meeting, or in the hallway. Rather, consistent opportunities must be provided for teacher and student voices to be heard *and acted on*. There needs to be an increase in the *genuine influence* of teacher and student voice in education. Teachers and students need more than an opportunity to voice their ideas, they need a seat at the decision-making table—real opportunities to influence the learning environment of which they are the most essential components—indeed, the reason schools exist at all!

One could argue that teachers have numerous vehicles to share their voice. Faculty meetings are a seemingly obvious place, most teachers are part of a union that will readily represent them, and teachers may publish their ideas in various educational journals, reaching an even wider audience. Unfortunately, however, faculty meetings are not always the most conducive place to exchange ideas or meaningful dialogue, many teachers would argue that teacher unions do not represent their ideas at all, and publishing can be a daunting process. While we recognize that no school is perfect, we are of a no excuses policy. Whether faculty meetings and unions at your school are ideal or not, there are a few underlying principles that can be fostered in

schools that will promote and honor teacher voice. (And it is important to note that teachers and administrators share equal responsibility in the process.)

## TEACHER VOICE

For me “teacher voice” is not about talking or about being heard. It’s about entering the larger conversation. It’s about wrestling with ideas and ideals. It’s about reflection. And it’s about change. Unfortunately, too many of us are in egg-carton isolation, alone in our classrooms, waiting for an invitation to engage. We aren’t a part of the dialogue of dreams. In my early years as a teacher, I worked with some dynamic experienced teachers who sought me out. They valued my

insights. They invited me to spend time outside of the pressure cooker of the regular school day, often over a glass of wine or a cup of coffee. Those conversations framed (and probably continue to frame) my thinking about teaching and learning.

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### *3. They can be fostered through the development of the 3 Guiding Principles: Self-Worth, Engagement, and Purpose.*

**Self-Worth.** For students and teachers to have a meaningful voice, they need a sense of self-worth. They need to feel accepted in the school community for being a unique individual and appreciated for the contributions they make. In short, they need to feel valued.

Data show us that only 74% of teachers feel they are valued by the school community (QISA & TVAIC, 2015). It could be argued that one of the greatest roles of a school leader is to instill confidence in his or her staff and let them know that they are valued as professionals in the schools’ community. It is similar to a coach getting the team prepared for the big game. The coach tells the players how incredibly talented they are and how there are a lot of people who believe in them. At game time, this comes in the form of a pep talk, ending with “Now get out there and win!” But the reality is that the players’ self-worth is fostered daily, starting on the first day of practice, coming in the form of encouragement, acknowledgment for success, productive feedback when mistakes are made, and appreciation for the players’ contributions to the team. The pep talk only works because self-worth has been fostered along the way.

In schools, students and teachers' self-worth is fostered when they are appreciated for who they are and the impact they have on their peers, each other, and the school community overall. School conditions need to be created that allow every individual to feel like a valued member of the community who truly belongs, while recognizing and celebrating each person's uniqueness. Teachers will feel confident sharing their ideas when they feel accepted for who they are, even when disagreement exists. While everyone does not need to be in perfect agreement (in fact, healthy discourse from differing perspectives is fuel for growth), everyone should concur that various points of view will be listened to and considered respectfully. When self-worth is fostered, teachers will see that their voice is honored, that they are respected for who they are, and that they make a valuable difference in the school community.

While principals should certainly serve as role models of respect and appreciation for others, the responsibility of creating an environment where teachers are encouraged and feel comfortable sharing their ideas does not rest solely on the principal's shoulders. Staff members need to value and respect the opinions of their colleagues, as well. Surprisingly, only 71% of teachers reported that staff members respect each other (QISA & TVAIC, 2015). When all the adults serve as models of respect and work to make their colleagues feel appreciated for their impact on the school community, everyone will benefit—including the students.

**Engagement.** In addition to developing self-worth, conditions in schools must promote meaningful engagement. Countless books and studies promote the importance of student engagement in the classroom. However, the primary driving force behind the engagement of students is the engagement of their teachers, which is not addressed nearly as frequently. An engaged teacher is enthused by the subject matter, motivated by the sheer presence of a student, and driven to share knowledge in a variety of ways. The passion of an engaged teacher is infectious, drawing students into their own engagement in class. The result is an improved learning environment where students and teachers alike are more motivated to achieve their aspirations.

Enjoyment of learning can impact motivation. Encouragingly, we found that 99% of teachers enjoy learning new things. Stark in comparison, however, is the finding that only 54% say meaningful professional development opportunities exist in their district (QISA & TVAIC, 2015). Teachers are ready and willing to learn new things—new ideas that will enhance their engagement and effectiveness in the classroom. But the passion of teachers will be stifled if schools do not provide them with relevant opportunities! How can schools afford *not* to provide meaningful, engaging professional development? Teachers are thirsty for it, and the impact is multifaceted. Professional development that is relevant to teachers not only provides them with fresh ideas and resources to utilize with students, but it provides another venue for collaboration, for sharing their voice. Teachers will be motivated to use their voice, and use it well, when they believe it is going to enhance their

students' learning. Teacher voice will only matter when the schools create and encourage an engaging professional learning environment.

**Purpose.** Engaged teachers who possess a strong sense of self-worth also need a true professional purpose. The purpose is layered, because there are goals established by schools that teachers strive to achieve, as well as personal goals that teachers establish. These goals are distinct, yet overlapping, and ultimately come together to strengthen a teacher's sense of purpose.

Teachers with purpose take responsibility for who they are and what they stand for as educators. Teachers with purpose are confident, responsible, and contributing members of the school community. They exude confidence but are not arrogant. They are strong but not overbearing. They are opinionated but not blinded by their own perspective.

Sadly, only 59% of teachers say they are comfortable voicing their honest opinions and concerns with others at school (QISA & TVAIC, 2015). Almost half of the teachers surveyed are fearful of expressing their voice! Teachers who are unable to articulate their voice in matters that directly impact their purpose in school will not achieve their full potential. That is a hindrance to everyone—teachers, students, and administrators alike.

When a teacher's sense of purpose is clear, and the teacher is able to articulate and act on that purpose, the impact is priceless. Not only does the teacher's motivation and commitment have a direct effect on the teaching and learning environment, but the teacher is poised to serve as a model for students. Teachers with a true professional purpose are also better prepared to foster a sense of purpose in their students, helping them take responsibility for who they are and what they want to become.

## WHY STUDENT VOICE AND TEACHER VOICE MATTER

- Offer an “insider's” perspective on the state of various aspects in the school
- Establish a sense of belonging within the school community
- Advance collaboration and mutual engagement between students and staff
- Provide leadership opportunities
- Encourage greater personal responsibility, as well as a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the school overall
- Promote curiosity and creativity
- Stimulate innovative problem solving

We have been encouraging teachers for years to foster student voice—to guide students in using their voice to build relationships, become engaged in learning and

life, and develop a sense of purpose and responsibility. We have come to understand that this cannot be fully realized without teachers themselves experiencing the very same thing: opportunities to develop and utilize their own voices in an environment that respects and supports the process. It is like asking someone who has never been under water to teach someone how to scuba dive! We believe that if the voices of students and teachers are to be recognized and valued, there needs to be a shared understanding of what having a voice really means, and what it does *not* mean.

Let's start with the latter. Teacher voice is *not* about simply saying what you want and receiving it. That is called "getting your way." Teacher voice is more complex than that. Too often, we hear that the reason teachers feel they do not have a voice is because nothing happens when they offer their suggestions. First off, teachers must be sure of two things: (1) Their suggestions are communicated clearly, and (2) the suggestions can have a meaningful impact in the school. Even the most innovative idea can fall flat if it is not communicated clearly. And let's face it, not all ideas are great. That does not mean they shouldn't be shared—they should. Part of brainstorming is sharing without judging. You never know which idea will lead to valuable discussions about meaningful change. One idea prompts another and the collective conversation typically leads to an end result much different and richer than any individual thought would have produced on its own. Not every idea is spectacular or even good enough to be implemented, but all ideas have the potential to positively impact the eventual outcome.

Teacher voice is *not* about being a member of the teachers' union. Many people think teachers have a voice because they are represented by a strong union, capable of making a point using a collective voice. Good teachers' unions can and should represent the voices of teachers, but we are talking about individual teachers being comfortable and confident sharing their own thoughts and views about the teaching and learning environment.

Finally, teacher voice is *not* strictly about having the opportunity to talk. Listening is an integral component of teacher voice. No one should talk so frequently that they lose the ability to hear the voices of others. Teacher voice is *not* about controlling a situation but rather being a willing, collaborative participant in the process.

So what *is* teacher voice? It is being able to speak openly about your opinions, ideas, and suggestions in an environment that is driven by trust, collaboration, and responsibility. Teacher voice is about *listening* to others, *learning* from what is being said, and *leading* by taking action together. There are no age or experience requirements for teacher voice! In fact, the more varied, the better.

The teacher voice we are advocating for *is* utilized for the benefit of all, not just those who are the most vocal or persistent. When teacher voice is used effectively, teachers listen at least as often as they speak, put more energy into learning than trying to convince others, and lead by taking action with the best interest of all concerned in mind.



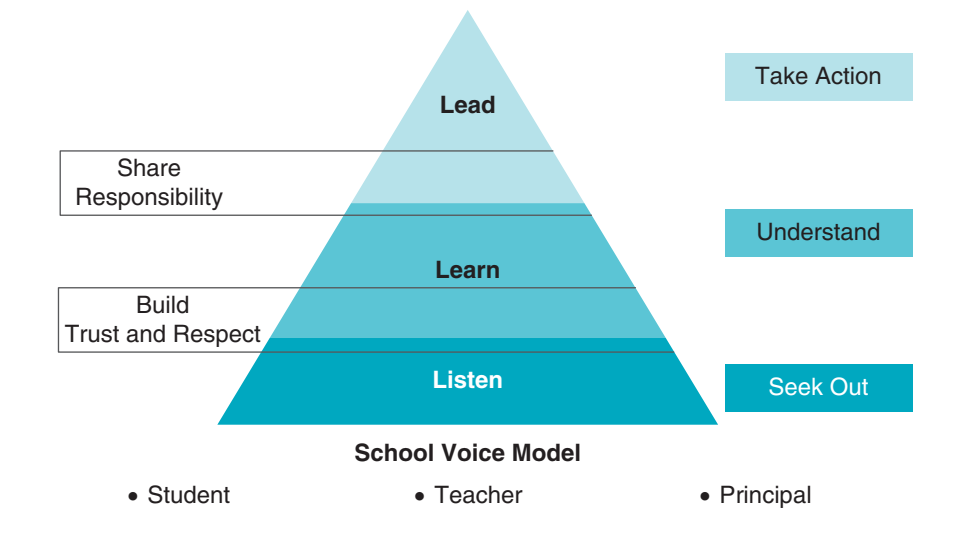
## TO FLOURISH, TEACHER VOICE NEEDS . . .

MORE:	FEWER:
Opportunities to communicate with one another	Moments of isolation
Open and honest dialogue between colleagues	Conversations behind closed doors
Professional development that addresses communication and collaboration techniques	Professional learning days focused on items that have little or no impact on learning or the culture of the school
Listening	“Discussion” with the goal of convincing
Willingness to learn from others in the present	Outdated opinions and habits of behavior based on the past

## A MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING TEACHER VOICE

Unquestionably, when teacher voice is successfully fostered, it is intertwined with the voices of various stakeholders in schools. Ultimately, the progression of our work on student, teacher, and principal voice has led to a model that illustrates the dynamic nature of voice in a manner that is applicable to all. The School Voice Model (Quaglia, 2017) represents a process that allows teachers (and students and

**FIGURE 1** School Voice Model





principals) to develop their voice in a way in which it is heard, respected, and recognized as advocating for meaningful change in school. As the diagram demonstrates, even when leading, you must continue to listen and learn. (Figure 1)

There are three major components to the School Voice Model: Listen, Learn, and Lead. As illustrated, there are no distinct lines delineating one component from the other. Instead, they build off of and merge with one another. Although most people conceptualize voice as being all about leading, we believe it has more to do with listening first and remaining willing to learn from others.

## LISTEN

Listening is more than hearing someone; it is not a passive act. Effective listening requires outreach, openness, and a genuine interest in understanding the thoughts and ideas of others. To truly listen, teachers need to seek out the opinions of those around them. This can be a challenge, because the key is to seek out voices that are dissimilar from your own. For many, that is an intimidating undertaking. Nonetheless, it is essential. Nothing builds a deeper sense of mutual respect than genuinely listening to and considering the differing viewpoints of others. The overwhelming challenge in this stage of the voice process is teachers' own inability to communicate well with others. Only 48% of teachers think they communicate effectively in schools (QISA & TVAIC, 2015). This important issue is addressed further throughout the book.

Listening involves more than your ears; you must also listen with your eyes. Take note of when you see students engaged or disengaged from learning. If you notice that a colleague is happy, upset, or frustrated, ask why and what you can do to better support him or her. Observe parent participation and determine which opportunities elicit the most enthusiasm. How can you capitalize on what you have seen and heard in order to show parents you value their opinions and ideas? When you read about local companies that give back to the community, reach out to them for opportunities to collaborate. "Listen" to others by following educational topics on social media (elaborated on in Chapter 6). For example, #satchat is an opportunity to learn about what others believe is important in education.

Sadly, listening has become somewhat of a lost art. (People seem to be invested in a disproportionate amount of talking!) But to be effective with their own voices, teachers must first be willing to make the effort to listen to the voices of others. And while it is imperative to do within a school, it should not be limited to within the building. Listening to the voices of others beyond the school walls—within the larger community, including globally—expands the capacity to learn.

## ■■■ IN ACTION: LISTENING TO TEACHER VOICE

It is so important to hear what all staff members have to say. Every Thursday afternoon we have a staff update. We use a Google form to collect all voices. No one person owns the staff update, anyone can contribute and this input leads to meaningful conversations. Anyone can also contribute to professional development. We listen to each other and co-construct solutions to problems or explore things we are interested in learning about. We have a very open culture of learning and are very intentional about creating and fostering effective teams. We don't leave it to chance.

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### LEARN

As a teacher, listening needs to be more than a polite gesture or the socially appropriate thing to do. We are in awe, in an unfortunate way, of the number of open forums we have attended where a myriad of wonderful things has been said, yet nothing was really learned. It is as if attendance itself at the forum is sufficient. Far from it—listening is a great first step, but the true value of listening is in *learning* from what you heard.

Underpinning the learning, and the successful development of teacher voice, is the fundamental belief that people around you have something to teach you. Regardless of age or years of experience, the people you work with (and teach) embody expertise. Use your voice to raise questions that lead to deeper conversations! You may learn from a veteran teacher a unique way to connect your students with the community. You may learn a new classroom strategy from a first year teacher. You may learn from support staff about a different perspective on the role of parents, because they, too, may be parents, aunts, uncles, or mentors. You may learn from students' great ideas to make the learning environment more engaging.

Like listening, learning is not a passive activity. Rather than just being present, providing undivided attention during a conversation is important. In addition, taking notes is a helpful habit. This is beneficial both for future reference (when we are deep in conversation, it seems like we'll never forget the details, but our memory banks sometimes have other plans!) and to demonstrate to the person you are learning from that you value what they are saying.

During the listening and learning process, it is important to keep in mind that personal connections are important. In the midst of the conversations, relationships are

strengthened and trust and respect are established. We have found that teachers with the most effective voices have taken the time to seek out and listen to others who are not always like-minded. They are open to understanding different points of view. After listening and learning, they are able to share their voice in a way that not only represents their own opinions but those of the people around them.

Sadly, our data show that there is much work to be done. Only 60% of teachers think principals are willing to learn from them. More disheartening is that only 52% of students think teachers are willing to learn from what they have to say. There is silver lining. Remember, 99% of the teachers we surveyed claim they enjoy learning new things (QISA & TVAIC, 2015). Ninety-nine percent! That enjoyment for learning reflects an incredible potential for success with the foundational components of the School Voice Model: Learning by truly listening builds mutual trust and respect, which ultimately creates the capacity for collaboration and shared leadership between students, teachers, and the administration.

## TEACHER VOICE

“I’m graduating!” A senior recently told me, “I still remember how much I loved you and my kindergarten year!” Moments like these make me proud that I’m a teacher.

Kindergarten is my passion—hence my desire to teach an all-day kindergarten program at my school. I was overwhelmed with joyful pride when the principal, Shay Davis, listened to my ideas, trusted my experience,

and open-heartedly heard the research validating why this program would benefit our students. She afforded me the opportunity to follow my passion and trusted me to be the best teacher for our students. This meant more than words can say.

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## LEAD

Leading is all about using what has been learned to bring about meaningful change, and it is far from a solo endeavor! Having fostered positive relationships through the listening and learning stages, everyone involved is prepared for collaboration; the notion of shared responsibility now comes naturally. When people

know they have been genuinely listened to, and that their ideas contributed to the overall learning, they are much more invested in supporting others and accepting responsibility for moving forward together.

When teacher voice is at its best, all stakeholders are valued for their contributions to the learning community, engaged in the school improvement process, and committed to a purpose. Embraced with mutual trust and respect, decisions are backed by the cumulative knowledge and experiences of all involved. They are not driven by testing and accountability but rather a shared sense of responsibility for determining and acting on what is best for the school.

Using this School Voice Model, teachers will be able to advocate for change based on the unique perspectives and experiences of the entire school community. If teachers effectively listen to and learn from their colleagues, students, administrators, parents, and the community, teacher voice will become an effective tool to lead through a collaborative process. The transformation that takes place with the School Voice Model is one that not only allows teacher voice and the voices of others to be heard and valued but establishes a leadership model where all stakeholders contribute to the action plan. Of course, there are variables that can either facilitate or hinder the process. Chapter 3 is dedicated to addressing those factors.

## TEACHER VOICE

The teachers at my school were given the chance to have a voice to benefit our educational community. We were asked about our personal life, our professional goals, and what type of professional development we needed or wanted. Our principal listened to our needs and I knew my voice was heard. She put me in a leadership role and gave me the chance to help others. As an educator, this made

me feel that my knowledge and my professional opinion was highly valued. It gave me confidence and taught me the importance of having a voice.

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Student and teacher voices contain valuable lessons that all leaders, indeed the entire community, can learn from. Teachers need to be prepared to share, and all must be ready to listen. This is the only way to create meaningful change.

## Action Steps to Foster Teacher Voice

- **Establish a Teacher Mentoring Program.** One of the best ways to promote teacher voice is to establish a culture of mutual trust and responsibility. Having veteran teachers support new teachers is a great way to accomplish this. If new teachers have someone at the school who believes in them and simultaneously supports and learns from them, then new teachers will share their voices openly and honestly.
- **Post the hopes and dreams of staff members in the faculty room.** It is unreasonable to expect anyone to listen to and learn from others in the school if they do not know each other. We are not suggesting any type of “truth or dare” moments, just the opportunity for staff members to share something meaningful about themselves so others can understand who they are as people.
- **Spend a minimum of ten minutes at every staff meeting building communication skills.** All the communicating teachers do with their students does not guarantee they will be effective communicating with one another. Teachers do not become better communicators simply because it is a job requirement; communication is a skill that needs to be learned and practiced. The topics for communication exercises do not have to be education-related—they can be about anything! The goal is to develop skills to communicate clearly and effectively.
- **Protect time, at least once a week, to meet with colleagues.** The three most pressing reasons teachers provide for why they do not listen to and learn from colleagues are time, time, and time! Recognizing the importance of teacher voice is a good start, but unless the school is purposeful about establishing time for staff to communicate and collaborate with one another, it will never take hold.
- **Create a Professional Learning Board.** Designate a bulletin board in a public area of the school where teachers can share something new they learned from a colleague. Update the board weekly. Everyone, including the students, will be impressed with how many great ideas teachers learn from each other on a regular basis!
- **Buy a notebook.** Taking notes is a great way to let other people know you are invested in learning from them. Recording what they have to say reflects back to them the importance of their ideas. We each have a notebook we walk around with when visiting schools; it is here that we capture what we are learning. Our notebooks allow us to reflect on all the amazing experiences and insights we have learned while working with others. These reflections continuously inform and drive our own actions.

## Teacher Reflections



1. What do you do to let other people know you are invested in listening to and learning from them?
2. List seven things you have learned from students, teachers, administrators, and/or parents over the past month. If you cannot readily think of at least five, we suggest you start listening more.
3. When was the last time you expressed your voice with more than ten people in a room? If you cannot think of a time, we challenge you to do just that within two weeks.