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5 Reasons Leaders Need to Encourage Teacher Voice

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on October 5, 2014 8:27 AM

Many teachers feel that they don't have a real voice in their school community, and if they don't have a voice their students won't.

In [Student Voice: The Instrument for Change](#), Russ Quaglia and Michael Corso write about the 8 conditions needed in schools to encourage student voice, which ultimately allow students to "reach their fullest potential academically, socially and personally." The first condition they describe to readers is that of "Belonging."

Belonging sounds fairly simple. Everyone needs to belong to something. However, the way it is described by Quaglia and Corso is a bit different. "Belonging is the belief that a student is a valued member of a community, while still allowing him or her to maintain his or her uniqueness." The key is to not just belong, but keep their identity as well.

There are many ways students can belong, but too often they try to change who they are to fit into the group. They lose a bit of themselves in an effort to belong to something that they believe is bigger. As much as this is about student voice, it has implications for teacher voice as well.

Losing Our Voice

Schools are not created equally...nor is school leadership. Some schools are led using a democratic process, where everyone has a voice in the school community, and other times schools seem to be run like more of a dictatorship, where no one is given a voice, or if they are asked for input, it often isn't taken into account when decisions are made.

Over the past few years, teachers have been stripped of their professional practices and told that they have not been teaching "the right way" because new initiatives come along with very little research to back them up, and because of pressure from the top, teachers are told to change their direction. After being pushed in one direction or another, they are then told that they whine too much when they resist change and become the lightning rod of criticism when they have had very little voice in any changes made.

What's even more interesting is when we dive deeper into the research, teachers have not only been stripped of their voice in many schools, but they were never provided the effective feedback they ever needed in the first place. In [The Principal](#), Michael Fullan writes,

"The historical problem is that teachers actually receive very little feedback about their work - a problem that is still predominant today. In its Teaching and Learning International Survey of teachers in twenty-five countries, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013) strikes an all-too-familiar note: 22 percent of the teachers have never had any feedback from their principals (not to mention whether the feedback was valuable for any of those who did get appraised); over 50 percent have never received feedback from an external source; yet 79 percent of teachers would find constructive feedback helpful (p. 76)."

We live in a new world, and we do have to stay current in our practices, but we should work as a school community to figure out how to best move forward. In [Unmistakable Impact](#), Jim Knight writes,

"When leaders do not honor teachers' voices, telling them to implement step-by-step programs or practices without asking for their thoughts or suggestions, they communicate the message that they do not trust teachers to think for themselves. To silence the voices of teachers by asking for compliance (just follow the script) rather than ideas and feedback is dehumanizing - treating teachers like objects rather than thinking professionals (p. 35)."

5 Reasons to Honor Teacher Voice

Why don't some administrators believe that teachers should have a voice? Recently I spent time providing a regional training where some of the administrators who were in attendance did not believe teachers should have a say in the decisions made in their school. Other school leaders walked in with an agenda and couldn't understand why teachers just did fall on board.

If we allowed teachers to have more of a voice in the process, instead of just talking negatively about them when they didn't change the way we wanted them to, perhaps there would be less resistance. And there are at least five reasons why school leaders should encourage teacher voice.

They are:

Teacher Expertise - No, they may not have led change at the building level, but they certainly have many years of experience in the

classroom. Their knowledge of students, the way they can meet the emotional needs of children, and the fact that most have advanced degrees in education should make leaders think twice about making decisions without them.

Additionally, I worked with many teachers who read journals, blogs and books about teaching and learning, and they tried to put that knowledge into practice. Not all teachers are perfect (no one is!), and we all have to show growth every single year, but that growth will look different for each teacher, and perhaps leaders should work with teachers using an instructional coaching mindset in order to find the best way to move forward.

Democratic Process - Schools need to be run like a democracy and not a dictatorship. All stakeholders should have a voice in their school community, and not enough do. We need to stop running schools like a dictatorship and look to the fact that the power is in the collective thoughts of the people within the community. Sure, decisions at some point need to be moved forward, which Michael Fullan refers to as "*Relentless Leadership*" but that can involve a little bit that everyone wants, and explaining **why** to the group goes a long way.

Creates a Positive School Climate - Sounds soft doesn't it? It's not. School should be engaging, safe, and a source of inspiration. Unfortunately, we have too many students who get tracked in one academic direction, and like the Roach Motel...they walk in and never walk out. We need to engage as many students, teacher's aides, teachers and staff as possible. A positive school climate, which has to include teacher and student voice, can be a place children want to go instead of a place they feel like they have to go. And that goes for teachers as well.

Maximizes any Initiative - There are many teachers who are inspiring learning through innovative and engaging lessons in their classes. They are reaching the hardest to reach students. However, new initiatives like technology, the use of social media, and a focus on learning need to happen in schools at a much larger systematic level. A school that has teacher and student voice as part of their practice can look at those initiatives and make them better...and stronger.

Encourages Student Voice - If teachers don't have a voice in the educational process of a school, it is more likely that the students won't have one as well.

In the End

Being a school leader is not easy. It takes a delicate balance between knowing when to push, understanding how to pull, and making sure that you take the time to listen to all stakeholders in the school community. For too many years teachers have lacked a real voice in schools, and without their powerful and informative voices, we can never move forward to engage and encourage students to have a voice.

What are your reasons?

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