

Preface

I want to be good. I tried to be good. No one here [at school] understands me. Why don't they care what I am saying? Why don't they care about me? What is wrong with me?

—Brian, high school junior

There are some things that stay with us forever. Brian was a bright, articulate student. He was a good athlete and on student council. He was the kind of student you meet and think, *Wow, the educational system is working for him.* He was one of those students who loved to get involved in things, no matter what the activity was. Students liked him, teachers enjoyed having him in class, and the principal knew him by name. From all accounts, Brian was a success story in the making.

However, as time went on his grades started to slip, his attitude was less upbeat, and he started to distance himself from his teachers. He was becoming increasingly frustrated with school. He often skipped classes and was repeatedly tardy. His grades showed it, and now he was in disciplinary trouble. He never complained, nor did he make excuses for his behavior, which made him even more endearing to me. I knew him pretty well because of the work I was doing in his school, where he was a member of the student aspirations team (a novel concept 30 years ago).

I happened to be visiting his school the day he was being suspended. Walking into the principal's office, I could see that Brian was upset. I asked him if he was okay. Obviously he was not. I asked him what had happened and he responded, "I hate this place."

"You can't hate this place," I said. "This school was made because of kids like you. You are a shining star!"

He regarded me blankly, and his eyes began to well up. Fighting back the tears (since athletes from New England don't cry), he told me, "I want to be good. I tried to be good. No one here understands me. Why don't they care what I am saying? Why don't they care about me? What is wrong with me?" Brian's raw statement

would become a defining moment for me, one that in many ways set my career in motion, and inspired my dedication to understanding student aspirations and advocating for student voice. In the moment, however, and in my haste to comfort a student I cared for, I told him that everything would be fine and that I was sure things would be better when he came back.

But I never saw Brian again. After his suspension, he never returned to school. My heart hurts every time I consider that experience because I always think I could have, and should have, done more. The system failed him. I failed him. No one was listening. I was in my twenties and only wish I had known then what I know now. Maybe through some miracle he will read this book and know that I heard him—that I learned from him and am dedicated to creating better schools for all students. His voice has made a lasting difference.

This book both reflects and promotes student voice. At its heart is a fundamental conviction that students are not the problem in our schools; they are the potential. We believe student voice should be instrumental to any educational reform agenda. Our theme, therefore, is *Listen, Learn, and Lead*. We must not only ask young people their thoughts, but we must truly listen. We must learn from what they are saying by asking important questions and discovering *why* they feel as they do. And finally, we must utilize what we learn to be effective educators.

Student voice should never be perceived as fulfilling a mandate or thinking students have a voice because a student is placed on a few school committees. Student voice is not window dressing or some ploy to inspire students to do well on exams. We describe student voice from an operational perspective as *occurring when students are meaningfully engaged in decision making and improvement-related processes in their schools*. Student voice must become a way of being, not some plan to pay lip service to students' desire to speak out. A ninth-grade student told us, "Student voice is being able to be heard, to be listened to, then being able to change things for the better. It is one thing to be able to say what you feel, but to actually have adults listen to you and actually process what you say is totally different."

Ensuring student voice in school is not easy and must be grounded in both theory and practice. Is student voice the missing variable in our reform agenda today? We believe it is. Such new and exciting work as *New Pedagogies for Deep Learning* led by Michael Fullan, where student voice is integral to Dr. Fullan and his team's effort; Gavin Dykes leadership at the Education World Forum, ensuring students have a voice at the annual conference; Andreas Schleicher, Deputy Director of Education and Skills at OECD, has incorporated student voice questions in the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, study; and Dawn Haywood, who leads the Student Ambassadors Board at the Aspirations Academies in England are global examples that give us hope that incorporating student voice is far more than a passing fancy, but a force to be reckoned with and a now permanent feature of the educational landscape!

Student voice is not a fad to us. Nor is it some far-off notion that will not come to fruition in our lifetime. We are seeing more examples in schools where student voice as we define it is being taken seriously and having incredible benefits for the entire educational community. We see fewer dropouts, fewer absences, engaged learners leading to greater academic success, and, most importantly, students with purpose and an understanding of who they are and want to become. For the first time, we are seeing students as active partners in their education. These student partners are not an elected or selected “special” group of students but rather cut across all ages, races, and abilities. Students with voice have one precious thing in common—they know they matter!

This book represents a new and innovative way of understanding, involving, and inspiring students. First, the *Aspirations Framework* provides a model to understand students that is based on basic constructs of dreaming and doing. Second, this model is used to identify the conditions in school that inspire students to have self-worth, be meaningfully engaged in their learning, and have a sense of purpose. Finally, we develop this *framework for action* and present concrete ways and examples that promote and encourage student voice as an instrument for change.

We take great pride being straightforward and honest; our critics call it *bold*. It is designed to share the truth of what students think about school with educators who want to make a difference. The book is driven by what happens in practice, not just theory. It incorporates data from more than one million students using the My Voice student survey and student focus groups, as well as field observations and interviews spanning three decades and several countries.

We hope this book prompts you to reflect upon your own experience and expertise, and prepares you to lead with the sure knowledge that your students can and will want to join you.

—Russell J. Quaglia