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“It’s Like Having a Metal Detector at the Door”: A Conversation With Students About Voice

PAUL: ONE OF THE things I love in school is that we’re trying to learn—not just get the right answer. That’s really good. You want to get the right answer but you still learn. You do better because learning is more important than getting the right answer. (Oldfather, 1991, p. 204)

Florencia: I can express my feelings. In reading a book, the feelings are already there, and you get to read the feelings of the author. In math there isn’t very much feeling. And in writing you get to express your feelings. I just enjoy the writing the most because sometimes I can be funny in stories and sometimes I can really get what’s in my mind. (p. 88)

John: I want to be myself. I want to imagine what I want. I want to like what I want. I want to enjoy what I want. I want to be me. (p. 82)

Five years ago, Paul, Florencia, and John—working with Penny Oldfather (1991) as co-researchers—began extended conversations about their motivation to learn. The above quotations come from that initial research and are representative of what Oldfather “heard” from these particular students. Oldfather (1992; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994) has proposed a definition of intrinsic motivation, “the continuing impulse to learn” (CIL), which she defines as follows:

[CIL is] an ongoing engagement in learning that is propelled and focused by thought and feeling emerging from the learners’ processes of constructing meaning. CIL is characterized by intense involvement, curiosity,

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and a search for understanding as learners experience learning as a deeply personal and continuing agenda. (p. 8)

An important aspect of classroom culture central to the development of intrinsic motivation is what Oldfather (1993; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994; Oldfather & McLaughlin, 1993) calls “honored voice.”

Honored voice is a condition of deep responsiveness in the classroom environment to students’ oral, written, and artistic self-expression. Through honored voice the community of learners invites, listens to, responds to, and acts upon students’ thoughts, feelings, interests, and needs. (Oldfather & Dahl, 1994, p. 143)

Since the initial conversations, the students have continued to reflect on their experiences of schooling as they moved through middle school and into high school. As explained by Oldfather (1994), the students have chosen to become researchers in their own right as they explore the ways in which their high school teachers understand motivation and attempt to motivate students to learn. As it extends longitudinally, the research is coming full circle in interesting ways.

Sally Thomas, the original elementary school teacher, rejoining the research project, acts here as a facilitator for the following dialogue among three of the co-researchers during their 10th and 11th grades. Although the conversation begins with three questions, the students not only extend the questions in new directions, in one case dramatically transforming a question, but also introduce new issues.

True to the respect for students and their “honored voices” that has informed both the research process and its findings throughout, the students speak for themselves here, without intervening interpretation. In the interest of space, with student permission, about half the dialogue is presented, retaining the original sequence and topics addressed.

The reader will hear issues and concerns continuing from the earlier years, including choice and autonomy, collaboration and empathy, a deep desire to pursue learning related to their own interests and to express their ideas creatively, and a valuing of teachers who allow them to bring their lives outside of school into the classroom. Recently emerging issues include an increasing frustration with control and a growing anger at the lack of personal autonomy. Larger societal issues are reflected in their attention to racism and ageism and in their sophisticated understanding of the ways schools “socialize” students for society’s purposes.

The students do not speak with one voice. They differ by gender, for example, in ways that might be predicted along lines suggested by feminist philosophy (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). But as John points out, in the end, all three are united in their willingness to question the ways things are, especially when issues of fairness and right and wrong are involved.

“That Was My Way of Voicing.”

Sally: You and the other co-researchers have spent a number of years talking to Penny about what motivates you to learn. You know that one of Penny’s findings involved having a “say” and being listened to. At this point, in 10th and 11th grades, what does it mean to you to have a voice?

John: One thing the research did is teach me to respond to certain things in a positive way. It kind of showed me how to just tell a person what things that they did that are bad, but in a positive way.

Sally: So it means that you can speak up when you think something is wrong?

John: I was thinking about what happened in my English class. We were supposed to write about racism. None of us had taken the essay really seriously. We just thought about what we thought racism was and told how prejudice did certain things. . . . And one Jewish girl came with this paper that was “hate paper USA.”

Sally: She felt hated or she hated other people?

John: She talked about how African Americans always feel so persecuted, but compared to the Jews, they went through nothing and have no reason to complain. She asked why African Americans need to have their own TV shows. She was talking about Black entertainment. And it’s not like it’s only for African Americans. It’s jazz and stuff like that.

So I ended up writing a paper. It was like a response to her paper. But I didn’t criticize and pass judgment on her. The teacher really praised me for that. I did research on it. It turned out she was wrong about a lot of her stuff. I read out so many numbers and my percentages. And it made her paper look bad because she didn’t have anything backed up.

I said our point is not to show who has been more oppressed. Every culture at one time or another has been oppressed. The Jewish holocaust was around 6 million. The African holocaust was 8 million. That’s coming from Africa into Spain and all the United States. But then the Russian holocaust was 10 million. . . . So everybody caught something. That was my way of voicing something. I didn’t lash out like a lot of other people did.

Sally: Do some conditions or people keep students from feeling like they can speak out?

John: Teachers can. The teacher that I had for that class was really easygoing, laid back. She understands. Then there are other teachers who are less understanding. There’s a certain math teacher. She’s the type of teacher [where] you can’t say a word. God help you if you tried to stand up.

Florencia: She’s just like that at first. She just wants to scare the kids at first. She wants them to know who has control. Teachers want to have control. Then once they have that, they begin to loosen up.

John: She never loosened up with our class.

“Voice Means Having a Say.”

Sally: Paul, what counts as having a voice for you?

Paul: I think the most important part of having a voice is knowing what you want to learn about. Because that’s the whole point of being in school. Like what type of classes you can get and what teachers are going to teach about. Voice means having a say in what teachers you get. If you don’t like a teacher, you should be able to get out of that class because you’re not going to do well because you don’t like her or the way she teaches or what you’re learning about.

John: I'm used to having great history teachers, but my last two have been so into disciplining. It's sad when you love a subject and have a horrible teacher.

Sally: What about outside the school? Do you feel like you have a voice in other parts of your life? Can you express yourself in other ways?

Paul: Pretty much when you're under 18, you really don't have a voice at all. You don't have any rights at all.

Sally: What about your writing? Can you express yourself when you're frustrated, when you don't have other choices?

Paul: Yes. Like in your talents and with friends. But that doesn't really count.

John: There's never a point in my life outside of school where I don't have a say. It's never like somebody can come to me and say, "You don't have a choice about this." But I don't see how that affects my school life. Because the things I do outside of class, you know, at home, with my friends, whatever, doesn't amount to much inside of class. It only matters if the teacher will let you bring it in. For example, Mrs. ____ would let you have all the personality in the world in her class. She thought it was great. So it's like the teacher having a metal detector at the door.

"It's Made Me More Understanding."

Florencia: If I'm really answering the question. I think it's hard for teachers today, because I think most teachers are scared. . . . I think teachers are just kind of terrified that something will happen. They're trying to keep control so nothing will.

It's difficult to say what you feel sometimes, because you're afraid you might come into conflict with someone else's opinion maybe. And I think that sometimes shuts people up. And also, what is right and what is wrong? There's always that right and wrong thing.

There's this kid in my creative writing class. We used to have discussions once a week on whatever was going on. He was just really outspoken. Nobody really agreed with his views. He offended others. He was made to stop talking because his views didn't agree with the other people. I personally understood the others' point of view, but I thought that he should be heard anyway because that was how he felt.

Just being able to share your opinions is to me the biggest part of having a voice. Also being lis-

tened to. Having a voice has kind of made me look at things differently because I'm able to express my feelings. It's made me more understanding. When I'm listening to other people, I know that I wouldn't like to be put down when I'm saying something, so I wouldn't do the same to them. I guess I'm more open minded.

Sally: Interesting. John, you've said having voice means you can speak up in a more positive way. Florencia, you've said it means you are more understanding. Both of you have put this in a way people might not expect. Some people might think of having a voice as being somewhat self-centered.

John: There's this thing I didn't know about until a little while ago. My mom told me about it. It basically protects your right to say anything you want. But the downside is that if you're the Aryan Nation or the KKK, you can also say whatever you want. Legally, you're supposed to have the same rights as someone else. So it's not only the good that gets the right to say. It's also the bad that gets the right to say. And a lot of people don't agree with that, you know. But if you're going to give one person the right, you have to give everyone the right. It's not like a privileged thing. You can't really control people. And when you control people, that's when you get political prisoners and things like that, and that's when you have problems in the nation. The group that protects you is the ACLU.

Sally: Who protects freedoms and rights at school?

John: At my old school, I was on student council. They were deciding whether to make it a winter dance or a Christmas dance. For me it could be a Christmas dance but there were people who were going to that dance who weren't Christian. There were a lot of Muslims, Buddhists, and Jewish students. And the other students said, "I don't care. Let them think what they want. We're Christian and we're having it a Christmas dance." I said, "What if it was them here instead of you? What if they had a winter dance, or a Buddhist dance, or a Rosh Hashanah dance." I said, "You guys are supposed to be looking out for everyone. You're the student council of the school. You were elected [to represent] everyone."

Sally: Paul, do you want to add any more about voice?

Paul: I don't think we have voice. We should have a say about the classes we get, what we're

learning about and how we're learning it. I think we should be glad if people want to have a say in it. If people didn't care, then they wouldn't want to learn. Your question is "What do you want to have a voice about in your life?" Well it's not really that question. It's "What class can you have a voice in?"

John: And how much. When I stepped in my math class, I knew I wouldn't breathe. When I went to my English class, it was obvious that we had pretty much the freedom, not to do what we wanted, but to be vocal about anything we felt we needed to be vocal about.

Sally: Did she get good work from students?

John: Yeah. She got great essays. And she got people [to open up] who had sworn that they would never get up in front of a class—like one girl who just flat out said, "There's no way I'm reading in front of the class."

"Nobody Really Likes Teenagers."

Paul: I don't want to get back into the negative things, but I have a feeling that if I didn't have long hair I wouldn't have so many problems.

John: I've felt that. When I walked into the office [that time the teacher sent me], the counselor closed the door and jumped on me like I was a dog. There was no question in her mind [that I was guilty]. Yet when I talked to Mr. _____, he said, "It sounds like this did not happen the way the teacher saw it. I understand the way this teacher sometimes reacts." So he let me off. [It might have to do with the fact that] I'm six foot five. Teachers get really frightened when I jump up and say something.

Paul: I think it's the fact that we're teenagers and nobody really likes teenagers. We're not kids and we're not adults. Right now we're closer to being adults. So they still have to control.

Florencia: I was thinking of Willow [our elementary school] and how I got into trouble with Meriam. I wanted to be cool. When I'd get in trouble and go to the office, I would be terrified. And the principal was so calm. She would say, "Okay, let's talk about it." And she got us to talking and figuring out what we had done and why. . . . She was willing to talk to us about it. Like, how you guys were saying, "Oh, they already think that we're guilty. They don't listen to us. They just give us a punishment." I think if they would just talk to us and help a student say what happened. Hear from them. Ask

them why they reacted that way, what had caused the incident. Maybe it would be more just.

John: Having a voice is like if you say something once and you're heard, you'll be more confident to say it the next time. It's funny because there are always people who don't feel like they're able to express themselves. They always try to bring you down, drag you down, because you are able to say something. It's like those people don't even care to try. They don't have that confidence.

Sally: Florencia, I'm sensing that you're having more good experiences in school. Is that right?

Florencia: Well, I don't really have a problem with anyone. I don't think I have an exceptional group of teachers. I know some other students in the same classes hate them, can't stand them. Maybe I'm just more open minded. I look at them as trying to do their job. I just give them a chance when I'm going in there. I take it more easily.

Sally: Do you get to express yourself in those classes?

Florencia: I think I'm just accepting it because some of my classes just run the way they are. In my French class, we do workbooks, we read out of the textbook, and then we do homework. We come back and go over it and then do the workbook again. It's a pattern that I'm used to. I'm not complaining. There are other classes where I do have my say. I know when to say and when not to say. I wish I could think of ideas, make [the teachers] think a little.

"I Don't Think We're There to Learn."

Sally: What do you think schools could learn from students if they really listened?

Paul: I believe the better questions is what do students learn from schools? I don't think we're there to learn. [Of course] you can learn because there is information there that you can learn from. But it depends on how much you care about going to school and how much you study. How much you sell yourself out to get good grades.

Sally: Are you saying that what students learn from school is passivity and selling out for grades?

Paul: It's just like society. By nature the society will reject the person that doesn't do things like everybody else because that's the nature of society. It's what society is. School is just work and control. Like I said before, you can learn nothing and get an A and learn everything and get an F.

Florencia: I kind of agree with Paul. Their purpose is to teach you and our purpose is to learn. But really what we've been doing is trying to just get by and get good grades because we know that that's what colleges are going to see and what is going to count in the future.

John: You've got to get that worksheet in.

Paul: Not what you learned.

Sally: So let's go back to the question. What could a high school learn if it got serious about listening to students?

John: That we have minds. I like what Florencia and Paul said. Florencia summed up what he said which was really about just being crammed. What you go for is the grade, not to learn, and that's not right.

Sally: If other students were given the opportunity to talk and think about learning as you three have, do you think they would have some of the same ideas?

John: If they started young, like in sixth grade, yes.

Florencia: Yes. You can't just start it in high school. You have to start earlier.

Paul: Like what happened to me. In sixth grade I had a lot of trust in the system of school and I thought that we were there to learn. But then I got to junior high and especially now in high school. I saw that it was just a big joke. The whole system was totally absurd and it has completely turned me off. There's no way that I'd be turned back on unless it was perfect like we're talking about.

One of the biggest things I have a problem with in school is the way they go about punishing the students. Like say for instance ditching class. It's completely absurd. They drop your grade or make you fail. It has the opposite effect.

Sally: So where do you think the rules come from? We're back to the question of what schools could learn from students. Would it be valuable for students to be on the committee that decides on policies like that?

John: Yes, but it's never going to happen. At my old school, all the students did was decide what the names of the dances were. We tried to actually challenge them. We tried to show them, "Look at it this way, from our point of view. This will work." And people [adults] were sitting there, taking notes. One guy said, "That's terrific." And then we get turned down. They were not listening.

The only way anything is going to change any-time soon is if when one of the three of us or someone like us with our views gets on some kind of committee when we're older. That's when it's going to change. Right now, those people that are on that committee have the same old paradigms, the same old views.

"Find Out How Students Feel About It."

Sally: Do you have any other ideas about how schools might start giving students more voice? Say I'm a principal and I say, "Give me some ideas about what to do or where to start?"

Florencia: I would say to start with English classes. Those are the easiest to transform because you can be really creative in those. You can also be creative in world history. But it works easier with English.

John: That's true. My comp teacher [is a good example]. She said you have to take a final. She got us together in groups. She said, "Amongst yourselves, come up with the schedule. This is how many days we have to do it. These are the major things we need to do. We need to read the book, watch the movie, and have some kind of fun." So we went over it in each group and presented our ideas to the class. Then we took the best ideas. We watched the movie first, we read the book and took little quizzes.

At the end, we had the choice of taking a creative final or a Scantron test. It was about half and half. For mine, I did the creative final, a collage. It was kind of ironic that mine was on how we can change schools. It worked out fine. Everybody was happy because the people that wanted a test did that. The people who wanted to create, created. And the teacher was happy because everybody did something. Everybody got what they wanted.

Sally: How would you change other teachers'?

John: Have them sit down and do this, talk like we're talking now, and see how it works with students.

Paul: I think getting more information from the students is all that they need. They need to find out how students feel about it.

John: If another comp teacher was sitting here, one who used the traditional Scantron every time, and we shared ideas like this; if she heard how well things worked in my other comp class and how everybody was happy; if she heard how everybody ended

up liking the teacher and loving the class, that would be ideal. They just need to hear it from the students and see how it works. You can always say, "This [idea] might work well or this [other idea] might work well." But you have to be able to prove it.

Sally: Sometimes kids learn things the teachers never see.

Paul: Yes. For instance, the music class that I'm going to fail. I learned. I learned. I was so into that [class]. I just loved what we were learning more than anything else. [My teacher] never looked at that at all. I would always come up to him and talk to him after class about things that related to just everything because I wanted to know about it. But he's still going to fail me because of my attendance, so what does it matter.

Florencia: I think this is kind of interesting. My creative writing teacher asked us to give her input on how she should grade us for the semester. We got in two groups and made lists of what we thought was important and what we thought gave a student a grade. And a lot of the students came up with the same things, like "personal bests." The teacher has to get to know you pretty well to understand what your personal best is. And what you can do, your capability. Attendance never came up. Of course there was getting your work done and participation in class was important and group work. That was our grading for the semester. We got to grade ourselves. Then we had a conference with her and we both made what we thought the grade should be together.

Paul: Maybe they should also look at how good you're doing in a class compared to how you're doing in other classes. For instance, I would actually study and read the whole chapter again and again so I knew everything perfect for the music class. And I would get perfect tests just about every time. He never knew that that was the only class that I would do anything close to that kind of work for.

Their basic goal ought to be education. That's what I've been talking about the whole time. They find so many different things that are more important than education. Like my history teacher says, "Well they say legally I have to do this and this and this." Who cares? Legally we're supposed to.

"I Question Things More."

Sally: How has being a co-researcher helped you? Or has it hurt you in any way?

John: I've always been the first person to say something when I see something wrong. It doesn't matter if a teacher does it, an adult, a student, it doesn't matter.

Paul: The same here. Most people would have just gotten more discouraged or not even realized what the problem was.

John: Being a co-researcher, I see more of the delightful little things that I can argue about. You know it's easy to find them. But the big things too.

I was in [a restaurant] with my old basketball team. [My teammates] were mostly Asian or Korean. When I walked out to the car to get my jacket, the security guard stopped me and said, "Why are you with all those 'fucking chinks'?" I just laughed. [I pretended] it was okay. There were two security guards and one of me. When I sat down, I told my friends. I couldn't believe it. Nobody would say that. It's so racist it's unbelievable.

When my parents got there I told them. [With my dad there] I said something to the guard. Usually a person wouldn't have said anything. But [I did] because of confidence in just speaking out or being able to voice my opinion.

Florencia: I guess it's sort of the same thing for me, but it's a little different. I wouldn't say enough to get in trouble for it. I'm just not the kind of person that wants conflict. I'd just rather talk things out, to come to an understanding. Like when I'm sharing, I'm open. I'm not going to feel I'm right and you're wrong.

I question things more and see why would someone say something like this. I just don't look at it as if they're trying to be horrible or hurt someone. I try to think, "What's their reasoning?"

John: All three of us feel we question authority more. Flor, regardless of whether she says anything or not, she knows right and wrong when she sees it. Maybe she won't say anything the way I would or Paul would, but she knows. When she sees something she questions it. I think that's something we've all gotten from the research.

Sally: Has it caused any pain? More pain than if you hadn't started in the beginning?

John: Throughout life there's oppression and if you don't question it—racism, oppression, sexism, whatever it may be—if you don't question it, it's not going to change. It's going to be taken as "Oh it's all right." And if somebody tries to oppress somebody else,

I would hope they would say something. If no one ever says anything, it's not going to change.

Paul: And it only takes just one person. If one person starts questioning, in the future more people will also.

Note

1. Since this article was written, Paul has changed schools and is now attending an alternative school. In response to the question of how they wished to be identified, the students wrote the following:

John:

So you know where I'm coming from:

I'm aware

a 6'5" African American

lover

poet

sympathizer

and basketball player

who hasn't been tried by the media.

Florencia:

How can I explain who I am without seeing your face?

How will you understand without seeing mine?

How can I express how I feel without knowing your heart?

How will you understand without knowing mine?

Paul:

Prefers not to describe himself.

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TIP

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