The Importance of Youth Voice
an Interview with Roberto Rivera

Roberto Rivera is a predoctoral fellow with the Social and Emotional Learning Research Group at the University of Illinois at Chicago specializing in the relationship of youth voice to social and emotional learning. Hank Resnik, CASEL’s Senior Advisor for Communications, interviewed Rivera about his work during the summer of 2014.

Q
A key question to begin with is how does social and emotional learning (SEL) relate to Youth Voice?

A
Social and emotional learning is already strong and getting stronger, as the evidence demonstrates in elementary schools in particular. The story is somewhat different at the secondary level. In high schools especially, the traditional structure, notably the dominance of academic departments and the emphasis on high-stakes testing, makes systemic change more of a challenge. Yet in one study after another the need for change has been made clear beyond a doubt. In low-income urban areas the high school dropout rates are as high as 70%, and that is absurd. Even in more affluent settings youth of color are dropping out at a rate of about 50%. Along with this figure, overwhelming numbers of high school students say they feel alienated and disengaged from school.

It is interesting to me that we as adults design curriculum, we develop programs and school policies, and yet when the students don’t show up or demonstrate being engaged more often than not we blame them. When did they have an opportunity to have ownership in the process? When did they have a chance to have input into the curriculum so they could feel responsible for the outcomes? What we have seen in our work is that if youth are given the opportunity to voice their opinions and have input in the process, they are more empowered, they demonstrate greater engagement, and the entire process becomes more refreshing for both youth and adults.

Q
How can schools change systemically to create this kind of opportunity for youth voice?

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Systemic change in schools requires a focus on many different aspects of the system. Curriculum and pedagogy are extremely important. So are school climate and culture and, especially at the secondary level, a heightened sense of democracy. Many secondary schools operate in ways that are nondemocratic, treating students as passive recipients of established

“They say the lack of caring adults in their high schools who will listen to them and give them a meaningful voice in school affairs is one of the biggest problems.”
knowledge, instead of active participants. By allowing youth to have input into school policy alone offers real insight into what the real issues of the school are, what resources may be available, and what creative solutions could be implemented. What we hear from the youth we interview around the nation is that having this kind of voice and decision-making power in schools helps them to think of themselves as citizens capable of participating in creating change beyond the school setting.

Q
How does your work with CASEL tie into this?

A
CASEL is embarking on a very important journey that includes the realization that schools and school districts that are doing SEL well involve youth leaders in significant ways. What my work is focusing on right now is assessing best practices of districts, schools, and community-based organizations that have youth in position of power making positive changes. We are coming across tremendous youth voice work taking place in Oakland, New York, Nashville, and Chicago. But much of this work is taking place in silos.

Our goal after highlighting some of the tremendous work taking place nationally is to begin to create opportunities for these different groups to interface via the web. In the spirit of youth voice I don’t want to jump too far ahead as to what could come from this, but I speculate that these. I also think that youth participatory action research can be very important for the SEL community. There is room to look at the role that students can play in social and emotional learning having a more sustainable impact on the school and district levels. We need to share the vision that this is possible and begin creating platforms for other youth to get more involved.

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Can you give an example of a place where youth voice is successful?

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An example of a successful youth voice initiative is the work of the Student Voice Collaborative of New York City, where the school district has created a department focused on youth empowerment. Youth leaders are elected in their schools, and they meet biweekly with youth leaders from throughout the city to discuss school problems and potential solutions. In New York the youth leaders have created a rubric to identify key factors in school climate and culture that young people can take into different schools to do an objective assessment. This reinforces the idea that student voice is important not just on a school level but on a district level. It empowers young people to be directly involved in meaningful change.
Q
What made you feel so passionately about the importance of youth voice in your work?

A
My own school experience left me with strong convictions about the importance of youth voice. All the way through to high school I was classified as learning-disabled. I was placed in remedial math and English classes for my entire public school career. I couldn’t get into a four-year college because my grades were so low, so I went to community college in Madison, Wis., where I could live with relatives. Fortunately, I was really good at baseball, which was the main reason I stayed engaged in high-school and had just a high enough GPA to graduate. My dad’s dream for me was that I would become a professional baseball player. But that wasn’t my dream for myself. I realized while attending community college and also volunteering at a teen center that I wasn’t learning-disabled. I just learned differently. I had recently started a hip-hop line of clothing as a business and was sponsoring artists around the city. While at a concert with international artists, I was invited by a local director of a teen center to come down and check it out. I realized that the youth demonstrated a great passion in the arts but lacked mentors to help them with their craft. Realizing that I had probably the best network of artists in the area, I started inviting them to host workshops. This led to doing concerts and festivals and eventually conducting original hip-hop plays. I realized that if I was writing plays, getting grants, and organizing all these programs, that I was intelligent and competent, and I just needed an opportunity as a young person to experience this for myself.

Q
How did this realization influence your own educational pathway?

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I started attending community college with a new vision. I related every class I took to my community work and started getting all As for the first time. I quickly moved out of remedial classes and got into regular classes and was later able to transfer to the University of Wisconsin, Madison. My experience with hip-hop taught me that I could create things that might have not existed before. So when I got to UW-Madison and had to declare a major, I realized that I didn’t have to conform to a pre-existing major I wasn’t passionate about. My drive to make learning relevant to my life and helpful to my community eventually won the faculty support needed to create my own major. It was called “Social Change, Youth Culture, and the Arts.” It enabled me to experience education in a way that was meaningful and significant. When I graduated I was invited to create an initiative at the university centered on urban youth and the arts called the First Wave. Today hundreds of young hip-hop artists focused on making change in the community have gone through this program. People asked me how I was able to do this, and my best answer echoes what Bill Gates said when asked how he created the.
personal computer: “I feel like I didn’t create anything, the moment was pregnant with potential and I happened to be the midwife.”

Q
How did this experience further your work in the community?

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I figured if I could create my own major and learning community at a Big Ten University I could create other things like changes in school systems. When I considered the problem of youth violence and how it gets in the way of learning and students’ success, I decided to create a curriculum that could help. In 2005 I established an educational organization called Elements of Change. I received an investment and began to work with the Madison (Wis.) school district to create a curriculum for kids classified as “at risk.” Instead of punishing them or trying to get them to fit into some preconceived mold, we welcomed them into a leadership academy that recognized their strengths and celebrated their various assets. We told them, “Our job is to help you become the best leaders you can.” Their GPAs jumped full points cumulatively in less than a semester, attendance levels improved, and behavior issues decreased. This is when teachers started requesting that we train them in our pedagogy.

That summer I lectured at the UW-Madison School of Education and had a realization: by engaging youth we can change lives, but by engaging educators we can change a generation. That was when I decided I needed to go back to school. I went to UIC-Chicago and got my master’s degree in youth development. I realized that there were theories, empirical evidence, and frameworks that named what we were doing. So we started naming our approach as being a blend: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Social and Emotional Learning, with a Social Justice Youth Development spin. We shed our skin during this time and created the Good Life Organization and began doing work nationally. Now we are in more than seven cities including Los Angeles, Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison, Providence, and a few other places.

Q
Your experience gives you an interesting perspective on education. What would you say is good practical advice to those hoping to reach those deemed “unreachable”?

A
It starts with having a correct vision of our youth. Statistics like youth criminality decreasing 40% since the 1990s but the portrayal of youth as criminals has increasing over 600% through the mass media tell me that we have to detox from poisonous perceptions of our youth. This means rekindling the passion of teachers to take issues that are important to youth and integrate them into the curriculum. From our experience this can be done in ways that meet the SEL and Common Core Standards quite easily, and can even be fun.

“We have to engage youth in ways that focus on their strengths, honor their funds of knowledge, and give them opportunities to be problem solvers.”
Given the right support and the right experiences, young people deemed “unreachable” can be active learners and world changers. What we have learned is that this work is reciprocally transformative. It helps us to get back into the calling of being a teacher, which is to change lives, and make a difference in the world. In my opinion, those deemed “at-risk” just need ample opportunities to take positive risk, and what better place to give them these experiences than in schools, the true places of incubation for creating more active citizens.

Q
Thinking about future directions, what would you like to see happening in education?

A
Youth today are growing up in a knowledge and innovation economy. We have to do away with obsolete schooling practices that worked in the industrial economy. This means we have to put an emphasis on helping young people to be creative in solving issues using the resources available. It also means allowing them to build their SEL skills so they can work collaboratively with diverse populations. It means that they have to think critically and sift through masses of information and find what is useful and know how to best utilize it.

Looking at the work of Ernest Morell, Jeff Andrade-Duncan, Shawn Ginwright, and others, which demonstrates that young people can conduct research and become coauthors of academic articles while in high school, shows me we have to rethink our approach. We need to allow them to focus on the big issues that really impact their lives and show them how English, math, and other disciplines can help them change their realities for the better. If we can do this, we can activate the intrinsic motivation, relevant context, and social and emotional environment that will allow them to thrive and also allow their schools, communities, and the nation to flourish.

Imagine the kinds of literacies that can be developed in our youth when they come up with innovative projects to meet real-world problems and can demonstrate outcomes that legitimize their approach to stakeholders such as school, community, and city leaders. Imagine the kind of learning that could take place and how this could prepare young people for life in the 21st century. What if youth were allowed to share their perspectives and voices as members of school boards, CBOs, and city councils? Having platforms that highlight young people taking positive risk and celebrating them in doing so is going to be key. For now we have to move one foot in a direction that meets the needs of the current system while also move the other foot in the direction of where things need to go. My goal is to see this change happen in my lifetime, and I believe it will.

“Giving youth experiences that allow them to think critically, work collaboratively, and be creative not only changes them but also changes us as educators.”