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LOUD, OUTSPOKEN, AND CONNECTED THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF STUDENT VOICE FOR STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS

The experience of “school” is not a uniform one from classroom to classroom, student to student, and from one school activity to the next. The experience and setting we call school is comprised of many smaller settings (microsettings). These include individual classrooms, the cafeteria and gymnasium, hallways, sports teams, and afterschool programs. These microsettings vary in quality, levels and types of student engagement, and focus. A supportive school environment has strategies – and strategically placed adults – to ensure that students do not fall between the cracks. This usually requires coordination and reinforcement between the microsettings and the adults that manage them – administrators and instructors, school day and afterschool staff, teachers and resource coordinators, coaches, and tutors.

School-community partnerships, like the one between Glenclyff High School and the Oasis Center shared in this story, can create new opportunities for students – particularly those who struggle in school – to experience a strong sense of belonging and the positive developmental supports needed to reimagine themselves as leaders and strengthen their engagement in school.



Leo is a rising junior at Glenclyff High School. Confident, highly likeable, and a readily identified leader, Leo states his opinions persuasively and jokes easily with his peers. Leo is also an outspoken student – quick to summarize what could change in his school and broader community.

While charismatic, as a student with a history of suspensions, expulsions, and juvenile misdemeanors, Leo did not fit a pre-determined mold of “student leader.” For far too many students like Leo, outspokenness is more of a liability than an asset.

Fortunately, Leo’s leadership potential was quickly noticed by Ms. Richards, the family resource coordinator at Glenclyff High School. Ms. Richards’ capacity for seeing student leadership potential afforded a positive opening for Leo. The right venue for tapping that potential came when Ms. Richards nominated Leo to participate in *Our Town*, a weekend retreat on restorative justice for students, teachers, parents, and community leaders and the kick-off event for the *Peace Team*. The *Our Town* retreat was organized in partnership with the Oasis Center, a long-trusted community partner that supports schools in providing transformative and community-relevant leadership experiences for students.

Leo, new to restorative justice practices, found the structure and approach of *Our Town* to be pleasantly different from many of his previous school experiences. Restorative justice circles

are modeled from indigenous practices and provide a structured opportunity to heal harms and increase accountability as the whole school works toward positive culture change. Increasingly, more schools are initiating restorative circles, but they remain an opportunity all too rare for students with a record.

The Peace Team practices and models these restorative techniques, working to promote student voice in the aim to improve school culture for all students. Students led the Our Town sessions with confidence and skill, giving Leo a glimpse of what youth-led, developmentally positive spaces look like.

Leo also noticed that the space was informal and offered ample opportunity for hanging out, getting to know other students and adults in an informal setting, and engaging in honest conversations with students and adults about school issues. **Importantly, the restorative techniques afforded Leo two things he rarely experienced at school: acceptance and a platform for opening up about the challenges he faced.**

The ongoing work of the Peace Team – a space where Leo experienced belonging and a different way of being seen outside of the classroom – ensured that once Leo opened up there was somewhere for his story to land. Leo had a story that could inspire change, not just a record of disciplinary missteps and juvenile misdemeanors. Leo also had a role and a changed trajectory – from a disengaged student statistically likely to be on his way out of school to an engaged student leader that could help his school and community understand the barriers young people face and meaningfully contribute to conversations about how to remove those barriers. That narrative shift was transformative.



Leo's continued involvement on the Peace Team provided him with leadership opportunities and a growing skill set to translate his and other students' stories into productive pushes for change. Leo's strong connection and sense of belonging within the Peace Team also offered him a foothold in the school community that he hadn't previously had; a foothold that kept him anchored to school through graduation, a day that Leo admits wasn't guaranteed.

Jacob Aparicio, Oasis Center Building Bridges and WeCity Program Coordinator, described Leo's involvement this way:

“ You could tell that Leo wanted something to give him stability in life and a sense of belonging. The restorative team and the experiences he had to practice leadership were one way for that to happen. We knew he had a voice that needed to be heard. He was seeking his voice and just didn't know it yet.”

Leo's involvement with the Peace Team led to participation in broader community forums, including a panel focused on student “push outs” in which Leo met the head of the Nashville Juvenile Court Clerk. After Leo shared his story of the stigmas that are created around students with juvenile records, the Juvenile Court Clerk – who led the city's work on youth

engagement with juvenile court – saw the need to increase expungement opportunities for minors and connected with Leo and offered to mentor him. That connection allowed Leo to be seen and heard as a human being in a system most often associated with dehumanizing experiences; and conversely, for Leo to humanize the adults charged with running those systems through the building of a personal relationship.

None of Leo’s story would have happened without an intentional approach to student engagement, coordination between schools and community organizations, and a structure in which student experience is given voice.

The Oasis Center has been partnering with schools for three years to support existing restorative student leader teams and establish new teams at two additional Nashville schools. Using a combination of youth participatory action research and restorative practice centered approaches, these groups have a track record of engaging non-traditional student leaders. Such strategies not only provided a platform for Leo, but also for other students in the Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS).

“ In terms of student voice, in many ways, we have served as an intermediary for the district to their own schools. The value placed on student voice has changed over time in the district,” Aparicio reflected.

In 2018 and 2019, the restorative student leader teams partnered with the MNPS Department of Data, Evaluation, and Research to disseminate data on student perspectives of school climate. On the success of the school-based teams, MNPS – led by the Director of Student Support Services in partnership with the Oasis Center – has gone further, creating a district-wide student voice team and two student positions on the school board.

While Aparicio states that more needs to be done to support *adults* in building skills to partner with youth and effectively act on the information they present about schools, MNPS is moving in the right direction. **These recent moves demonstrate that student voice is always been present, they just need to be passed the mic.**

The Glenclyff Peace Team created an opportunity for Leo to build a new narrative grounded in trusting, supportive relationships with the adults who facilitate the Peace Team. Leo and his Peace Team peers present a powerful case for the transformative power of youth voice and the importance of ensuring that adults at all levels – classroom, schoolwide, community, and district – are prepared to provide developmental supports and be responsive to what students have to say.



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